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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

WRITERS AND RESPONSIBILITY: GEORGE ORWELL, NADINE GORDIMER, JOHN COETZEE AND SALMAN RUSHDIE

BY

KELLY HEWSON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled WRITERS AND RESPONSIBILITY: GEORGE ORWELL, NADINE GORDIMER, JOHN COETZEE AND SALMAN RUSHDIE submitted by KELLY HEWSON in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

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(Supervisor)

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Date: September 23, '88

Because of you, Gord, it's all right now.

In fact, it's a gas.

ABSTRACT

The old debate concerning the nature of the writer's responsibility has been revived with a new urgency in this decade, and it seems that the questions it raises are questions that agitate a number of contemporary writers.

In 1984 Salman Rushdie published "Outside the Whale," an essay which was clearly written in response to George Orwell's essay "Inside the Whale" (1940). As I see it, Rushdie's essay asks once again the question of the writer's responsibility: is the writer (simply by virtue of the fact that he or she is a writer) responsible for committing himself or herself in political terms? Or not? These are questions that also perplex Nadine Gordimer in, among other essays, one she published in 1985 entitled "The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility." And in an ambivalent review of John M. Coetzee's novel, Life and Times of Michael K, Gordimer appeals to Georg Lukács' theory of critical realism, the mode she favours for political expression. On the other hand, Coetzee, while expressing admiration for Gordimer's accomplishments in the critical realist mode, has stated in an interview (1978) that he thinks "the novel today is after a bigger game" than the critical realist type. As well, many claims have been made for the political import of Rushdie's fiction, fiction that draws on fantasy and that favours a kind of "magical realism."

This thesis does not attempt to recommend on political grounds an ideal mode for political expression. It takes up the more fruitful project of investigating how effectively a writer treats political concerns within his or her chosen mode. It examines several contemporary novels -- Nadine Gordimer's The Conservationist and Burger's Daughter, J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians and Life and Times of Michael K, and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children -- in light of some of the questions raised by the recently re-opened debate on the nature of the writer's responsibility.

Preface

Questions concerning the writer's responsibility are at least as old as Plato's Republic. They are questions that concern not only writers themselves but the State as well. Hence, for example, Sir Philip Sidney's need to write An Apology for Poetry. Hence, too, the need the earliest novelists in English felt to justify themselves in their prefaces. Hence, the didactic stress: instructing as well as entertaining.

But whereas in earlier writers such questions tend to focus on morality (even if this has been tacitly and sometimes explicitly understood to be linked to the political), in the twentieth century the political nature of responsibility is what has been urged. This urging has come, for the most part, from intellectuals on the Left. In Hungary, for example, by Georg Lukàcs, who revived the Greek notion of the Polis, arguing that "everything is politics."[1] This gives us a very broad definition of politics, broad and in some ways attractive. However, in the light of subsequent history, we can also see the danger of everything becoming politics. The way in which, for example, in totalitarian societies the private life gets eliminated. (It is one thing to want to tie the private life to the public in a relation that enriches

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[1] For full reference, see Chapter 3, footnote 9.

both, and quite another thing to abolish the private.) In practice, however, for Marxists, Lukács' formula quickly gets translated (or reduced) into an exhortation to take sides in the class struggle. In Germany, Bertold Brecht and Walter Benjamin contributed to the debate and in France, perhaps most famously, the debate was taken up by Jean-Paul Sartre, followed later by Roland Barthes and after him, by Alain Robbe-Grillet.

In the English-speaking world, the best-known contribution to the debate is Orwell's "Inside the Whale" essay, and it argues against a particular kind of commitment and defends a kind of irresponsibility against a certain kind of responsibility. His essay generated many attacks. Among them, E.P. Thompson's "Outside the Whale" (1959); Raymond Williams' Orwell (1971); Christopher Norris's Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views from the Left (1984) and Salman Rushdie's "Outside the Whale" (1984). Rushdie is one of the novelists I'll be discussing in this thesis.

It was Rushdie's essay that sent me back to re-read Orwell's, as a result of which I've come to decide that the latter provides us with the best starting point, primarily because of the way in which it encourages us to question the notion of politics in the modern world. It is all very well for Lukács to say that in the polis everything is politics, but the Greek polis is a small and more or less self-contained society. What happens to the notion of responsibility for the

whole when the whole expands to fill the entire world, and the whole is understood in terms of history? Specifically, in terms of world history? If the writer, as some maintain, is supposed to take sides in particular class struggles and foreign wars on the basis of a particular interpretation of world history, then clearly the whole question of responsibility becomes not only extraordinarily complex (and we get the temptation to accept a simplified party-line), but also quite intellectual and abstract. And the possibilities of making mistakes and self-deception multiply. In this sort of situation, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to know whether or not they know what they are talking about. There is also the difficulty of knowing what one really feels about things. Thus, Orwell talks in terms of a choice between either being faithful to individual experience (in the context of World War I) or pretending to see the whole in perspective. Orwell argues then that a writer's first responsibility, before she makes any decision to "take sides," is to know what she feels and then to exercise great care in her choice of words in order to render faithfully her experience.

Salman Rushdie, an Indian now living and writing in England, tackles several issues in his essay, "Outside the Whale," but the issue of most importance to the following discussion is his conception of the writer's responsibility in the present day. Rushdie sees Orwell as advocating quietism in "Inside the Whale" and, like other essayists before him who

have challenged Orwell's essay, understands Orwell's recommendation to write as if one were inside the whale as a kind of easy recipe for evasion. But, as we will see, to be "inside the whale" in Orwell's sense is not simply to be passive and irresponsible.

In any case, against Orwell's formula, Rushdie pits his own. Instead of Jonah's womb, he recommends "the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanly possible. Where Orwell wished quietism, let there be rowdyism; in place of the whale, the protesting wail." According to Rushdie, this is the only formula for a writer to adopt because in the modern world there is no whale, "nowhere to hide." While we may balk at the suggestion that the writer has to choose a formula, as far as Rushdie is concerned, it is imperative for literature to "take sides." Therefore, it is the responsibility of the writer to commit himself or herself in political terms.

These are some of the concerns that also agitate Nadine Gordimer, a South African of European descent with a large audience in North America and Europe. "The Essential Gesture" is one of the essays in which she reveals her interest in the question of the responsibility of a white writer in South Africa, a place which she describes in another essay as being "in the interregnum." How does a white writer, radically opposed to apartheid, make her "essential gesture" as a social being? That is, how does she put herself into a

meaningful relationship with a society that is struggling to be born? It is clear by her essay's questions that Gordimer herself is "outside the whale" and that she feels a responsibility to the society in which she writes, yet, at the same time, she regards as crucial Orwell's concerns for the writer's sincerity, concerns which Rushdie overlooks in Orwell's essay. By looking at two of her novels, The Conservationist (1974) and Burger's Daughter (1979), we can see how she manifests these commitments in her fiction.

In a review of a fellow South African's novel, Life and Times of Michael K, Gordimer reveals another kind of commitment. In her criticism of John Coetzee's protagonist, she appeals to Lukács's theory of critical realism, the mode she favours for politically committed expression. Coetzee is a contemporary of Gordimer's, of Afrikaans descent, and, like her, has a wide audience outside South Africa. Through his allegorizing (of which Gordimer is suspicious) and by his depiction in Life and Times of Michael K of a passive, presumably black protagonist, Coetzee might seem to be writing as if he were inside the whale, "robbing reality of its terror" by advocating quietism. This is a stance which some critics accuse him of; they find it particularly reprehensible when adopted by a white South African. However, I hope to explore the possibilities of the so-called apolitical stance by examining two of Coetzee's novels -- Life and Times of Michael K and, in relation to some of the ideas raised by the

former, Waiting for the Barbarians -- to show that in some contexts, passivity can be a potentially heroic stance (Michael K) and that wishing to escape politics doesn't necessarily make one a quietist (the Magistrate). In not wanting his art subsumed by rigidly political interpretations, Coetzee can be seen to be providing an extreme case for us as Henry Miller did for Orwell.

Finally, I will turn to one of Rushdie's novels, Midnight's Children. Many claims have been made for Rushdie's fiction: a reviewer of Midnight's Children, for example, declares that it is "a new kind of fiction of the highest order: magical, artistic, urgently political." Another reviewer of Shame maintains that in it we see Rushdie as a "magical realist." In this particular chapter, some of the conventions of magical realism will be outlined, followed by an exploration of how effective a mode magic realism is for treating political ideas. For Rushdie himself points out in "Outside the Whale" the variety of forms political commitment in literature can take: there is the need "to laugh and wonder," he writes, "as well as rage and weep." So, it will be the purpose of the final chapter to show how Rushdie extends the possibilites of the explicitly political stance (taken in one form by Gordimer) to include magic and humour, techniques which, in some hands, might seem to be the instruments of irresponsibility or escapism, as well as to see how much or how little he concerns himself with the issues

Orwell thought relevant to the writer's responsibility.

In all three novelists, one finds a preoccupation with political concerns: with History and specific histories, with various kinds of passivity and activity, with the interaction between the private and public spheres. All three novelists choose to treat these concerns in different ways -- roughly speaking, through critical realism, a kind of allegory, and magic realism. In this thesis, I will examine the ways in which each writer treats political concerns and evaluate how effectively those concerns are treated. By doing so, I hope to reveal the various ways in which the question of the writer's responsibility can be answered.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude to my teacher, supervisor and friend, Professor Garry Watson, will not soon grow old. For I imagine that in these pages, and in the many others to come, will be found the imprint of my regard for him.

My grandmother, Jean Armour Weber, whose energy and independence of mind I hope I inherit, deserves special mention, not only for her amazing letter-writing abilities, but for her constant support of my academic pursuits. She, along with my parents, Don and Sandra Hewson, is probably relieved that she can now give a simple answer to all those who ask her just what it is I'm doing.

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"Inside" or "Outside the Whale": George Orwell, Salman Rushdie and the Question of the Writer's Responsibility

The issues raised in two essays -- George Orwell's "Inside the Whale"[1] and Salman Rushdie's "Outside the Whale"[2] -- will establish the context for this discussion on the writer and responsibility. The old question concerning the nature of the writer's responsibility is raised in the arguments of Orwell and Rushdie, arguments that will be explored with reference to the contexts out of which they emerge.

Orwell's essay, written in England in 1939 and published in 1940, consists of three sections which contain in them respectively: a laudatory review of Henry Miller's novel, Tropic of Cancer; a polemic against the literary scene in England between World War I and the end of the thirties; and a series of grim predictions for the future in the light of which Orwell recommends his famous formula for writers.

Rushdie's essay, "Outside the Whale," was published in 1984, the year, he notes, of the "Orwell phenomenon." Like Orwell, Rushdie was writing out of England and in response to a particular climate: Thatcherite conservatism. "Outside the

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[1]George Orwell, "Inside the Whale"(1940) in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume 1. An Age Like This 1920-1940. Eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1970), 540-578. Subsequent references to the essay will follow the quotation in parentheses.

[2]Salman Rushdie, "Outside the Whale" in Granta 11, 1984, 125-38. Subsequent references will follow the quotation by page number in parentheses.

Whale" begins as an attack on "Raj revisionism," then turns to challenge the assumptions in Orwell's essay before ending with a series of recommendations for the writer in the modern world.

The essay that continues to spark so much debate is Orwell's "Inside the Whale." And it seems that the questions it raises take on a new urgency in this decade. Much has been said about Orwell's essay, but more remains to be said about it, particularly in terms of the kind of commitment it is recommending. While a summary of "Inside the Whale" will follow, it is not my intention to comment on all the judgements Orwell makes in it. Rather, I will limit myself to elaborating on those points that I consider essential and enduring.

Before doing that, however, I would like to point out that it is probably a mistake to do as Rushdie and E.P. Thompson before him have done, and take this single essay of Orwell's as representative of his <u>final</u> position on politics, literature and commitment. One should turn to Orwell's fiction and a number of other essays to come up with a more accurate perspective on his overall position (even at the risk of finding, as Raymond Williams does, a position rife with contradictions).[3] Nevertheless, for a man like Orwell to be

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[3]Raymond Williams, <u>Orwell</u>, Modern Masters (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1971), p.88. Williams suggests that it is "the paradox of Orwell" that must be seen as "paramount." As

advocating an essentially apolitical stance (a man who, as Bernard Crick slyly comments, went to Spain to fight, "not to bring back a boyfriend or attend a cultural conference," who wrote the revolutionary tract The Lion and the Unicorn and whose declared aim was to make political writing into an art)[4] demands a more rigorous examination than perhaps has been given.

Above all, it is crucial to read and understand Orwell's essay in terms of the background against which it was written. For Orwell was an individual who was nearly always in the centre of the history surrounding him and was subsequently very sensitive to its details. World War II broke out while Orwell was writing "Inside the Whale," an event that signalled the end of the thirties. And while responses to the end of the decade varied among writers, Samuel Hynes, in his study of literature and politics during the thirties, makes the point that many of them nevertheless seemed to share a similar

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he explains: "Instead of flattening out the contradictions by choosing this or that tendency as the 'real' Orwell, or fragmenting them by separating this or that period or this or that genre, we ought to say that it is the paradoxes which are finally significant"(88). Obviously, it is not the purpose of this chapter to attempt a biography of Orwell, but it is worth noting that he is not a man easily frozen in a historical moment. Orwell's ideas changed and were written down, it seemed, as quickly as the history determining him changed. That is why it is necessary to consider the background against which "Inside the Whale" was written.

[4]Bernard Crick, excerpt from a letter to the editor in Granta 12, 1984, 248. Crick, who has also written a biography of Orwell, was writing to the editor to challenge a number of points Rushdie had made in "Outside the Whale".

attitude, which may help to clarify Orwell's.[5]

Auden's "September 1, 1939", according to Hynes, was called the decade's "first epitaph" (386). In it, the thirties become the "low, dishonest decade" and the idea that the war was "a deserved punishment for the moral failings inherent in political ideas" was given form (386). Among those who wrote a farewell to the thirties was Malcolm Muggeridge. As Hynes notes, the dominant attitude of his story of the decade is similar to Auden's: the way in which the decade ended is taken as confirmation of "its foolish life" (387).

Orwell reviewed Muggeridge's book, The Thirties, in the spring of 1940 and agreed with its message. Muggeridge can find "no line of action," wrote Orwell, except "an indiscriminate walloping of all human activities whatever." But, he continued,

> as a social historian this does not altogether invalidate him, because the age we live in invites something of the kind. It is an age in which every positive attitude has turned out a failure. Creeds, parties, programmes of every description have simply flopped, one after another. The only "ism" that has justified itself is pessimism. Therefore at this

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[5]Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930's (London: Bodley Head, 1976), p. 386.

> moment good books can be written from the angle of Thersites, though probably not very many.[6]

This comment goes a long way in helping to illuminate Orwell's championing of Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer in "Inside the Whale"; it is presumably one of those few good books written from the angle of Thersites.

In his earlier review of Black Spring, a novel of Miller's following Tropic of Cancer, Orwell speaks of Tropic of Cancer as casting a kind of bridge across "that frightful gulf which exists, in fiction, between the intellectual and the man-in-the-street."[7] Tropic of Cancer is a rare book because it is a book about ordinary people behaving in an ordinary manner. So much of English fiction, writes Orwell, at least on its "higher levels," "is for the most part written by literary gents about literary gents for literary gents" (259). Miller's novel is notable in that it gets the "thinking man" off his perch and back in contact with the man-in-the-street, the "average sensual man."

In 1940, in "Inside the Whale," Orwell comes back to Tropic of Cancer to discuss it as a symptom of a new stage in English literary history as well as on its own terms. What is

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[6]George Orwell, "The Limit to Pessimism," New English Weekly, 17 (25 April 1940), 5.

[7]George Orwell, Review, first published in New English Weekly, 24 September 1936. See pages 259-262 in The Collected Essays, Volume 1.

now striking about the novel is its indifference to contemporary events. For a book to be written about "American dead-beats cadging drinks" in seedy Parisian cafes at a time when "Hitler's concentration camps were bulging" is for Orwell a remarkable thing, and in the first section of his essay, he attempts to explain why.

For one, Orwell appreciates Miller's "fearless" recording of the inane, squalid facts of "everyday life." Like Ulysses, Tropic of Cancer opens up a new world by "revealing what is familiar." Reading Miller's novel, Orwell gets the feeling that he himself is "being understood." And this is because Miller speaks to him in "a friendly American voice"--a voice, significantly, that is lacking in "moral purpose" and the "lies and simplifications" characteristic of most of the prose of the thirties -- about the "recognizable experiences" of human beings (543).

Because literature in the thirties has delved more and more into politics, says Orwell, there has been little room in it for the ordinary man. Miller's novel is important precisely because it makes room. To support his point about the involvement of politics in literature, Orwell turns to the differences between books written about World War I and books written about the Spanish Civil War. Some of the most extraordinary books about World War I were written by, or from the point of view of, ordinary people, ordinary soldiers. Books like All Quiet on the Western Front were written from

the point of view of victims who, though they were in the thick of the action, weren't pretending to understand what the war was about. On the other hand, books on the Spanish war were written in the main not by victims but by propagandists, people with a particular political axe to grind, "telling you what to think" (549). Orwell notes that Miller, even though he is not writing about the war, shares an attitude like that of the ordinary soldiers. He does not pretend omniscience. His is a voice from "the ordinary, non-political, non-moral, passive man" (549).

While some readers, particularly in the present day, might object to Orwell's description of the ordinary man (not to mention, woman) as "non-politcal, non-moral, passive",[8] Orwell admits in his essay that he has been using the phrase "ordinary man" loosely, and adds that the "ordinary man" in Miller's case unfortunately happens to be

> neither the manual worker nor the suburban householder, but the derelict, the declasse, the adventurer, the American intellectual without roots and without money. (550)

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[8]Rushdie, for example, vehemently opposes it. He ascribes "this myth of the inert commoner" to Orwell's "logic of retreat" and counters by pointing to mass movements in Iran, Nicaragua and not least, India: "I wonder if independence would have arrived in 1947", he writes, "if the masses, ignoring Congress and Muslim League, had remained seated inside what would have had to be a very large whale indeed" ("Outside the Whale," 136).

Still, Orwell maintains that the experiences even of "this type overlap fairly widely with those of more normal people," those who feel in control of their destinies only within the narrow confines of home or work. Events beyond seem as uncontrollable as the weather. This is one of the reasons for Miller's importance: because he is, in one sense, "passive" to experience, Orwell decides, he is "able to get nearer to the ordinary man than is possible to more purposive writers" (548).[9] Orwell ends the section by indicating that Miller's book, its setting, its subject and its attitude are all "out of fashion." In the second section of his essay, Orwell attempts to discover what this escape from current literary fashion means.

To do so, he sets Miller's novel against the background of English literary history since World War I. After a discussion of Housman's popularity, Orwell attempts to group prose writers of the twenties who, because of their varied origins, differences in technique and subject matter, are difficult to group together. Nevertheless, he indicates that despite their differences, writers like Lawrence, Eliot, Joyce, Huxley and Lewis share, along with a reactionary

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[9]The sense in which Miller is passive to experience is manifested by his "acceptance" of that which most writers would find horrible or unmentionable. Orwell likens Miller to Whitman in this respect, but then goes on to say that Whitman was "accepting" in a more healthy and hopeful age than the one Miller is in. "To accept civilization as it is," writes Orwell, "practically means accepting decay" (548).

streak, a "pessimism of outlook" and a lack of "purpose." The "purpose" that all of these writers have, says Orwell, is very much "up in the air" (557). No attention is paid to "the urgent problems of the moment," to "politics" in the narrower sense. While Orwell admits these writers view life comprehensively in their novels, the problem for him is that they view it from "the wrong end of the telescope."[10] Still, he claims this does not invalidate their books.

In the years 1930-35, the literary climate changes and a new group of writers emerges who, as Orwell explains, owe something to their predecessors in terms of technique but whose tendency is very different. The hallmark of the so-called "movement" writers -- Auden, Spender, Day Lewis and MacNeice -- is "serious purpose" and Orwell emphasizes how much easier it is to group these writers. They share almost identical backgrounds, techniques and politics. And their politics are Communist. Communism, it seems, is as persuasive an orthodoxy for writers of the thirties as Roman Catholicism was for writers of the twenties. But in being Marxized, Orwell contends, literature moves no nearer the masses. Prose works of the thirties are neither as popular nor lasting (in

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[10]To explain the reason for the pessimism predominant in leading writers of the twenties, Orwell turns to the fact that the era was "an exceptionally comfortable" one. It is, according to Orwell, "just in such times that 'cosmic despair' can flourish." He accuses even the best writers of the era of "a too Olympian attitude, a too great readiness to wash their hands of the immediate practical problem" (559). This is the outlook Orwell is describing when he says writers of the twenties look at life through "the wrong end of the telescope."

terms of literary merit) as those from the decade before.

Orwell claims that the reason for this widespread embrace of Communism and "the cult of Russia" in the early thirties was due to the softness of English life, middle-class unemployment, and the intelligentsia's lack of experience with suffering, war, poverty and struggle. It is in this section of the essay that Orwell makes his now famous attack on two stanzas of Auden's pre-revision "Spain 1937," Auden being one of the central "movement" poets. In his criticism of Auden's poem (a criticism that is balanced somewhat by Orwell's prefatory comment that the poem is "one of the few decent things that have been written about the Spanish war"), Orwell makes clear his belief that writers of the intellectual left were unacquainted with reality. The lines "the conscious acceptance of guilt / in the necessary murder" are taken in particular to illustrate

> the callous irresponsibility of the 'pink pansy' left in accepting acts of violence of which they had never seen examples and of which they had no experience.[11]

"So much left wing thought," writes Orwell, "is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is

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[11]Stephen Spender, The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75) (Glasgow: William Collins & Sons Co. Ltd., 1978), p.30. This is Spender's summary of Orwell's response to parts of Auden's poem.

hot" (566). Significantly, Orwell's criticism of Auden's phrase "necessary murder" is tested against his own directly-felt experience:

> Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder. It so happens that I have seen the bodies of numbers of murdered men -- I don't mean killed in battle, I mean murdered. Therefore I have some conception of what murder means -- the terror, the hatred, the howling relatives, the post-mortems, the blood, the smells. To me, murder is something to be avoided. So it is to any ordinary person. (566)

In fairness to Auden it should be noted that he later rejected the original poem for expressing an attitude he felt intellectually forced to adopt but which he never truly felt-- precisely Orwell's point. It should also be noted that the revisions in "Spain 1937," which were undertaken and published in 1939 before "Inside the Whale" was published, had little to do with Orwell's objection. Auden's later response to Orwell's objection is worth quoting:

> I was not excusing totalitarian crimes but only trying to say what every person thinks if he finds himself unable to adopt the absolute pacifist position. 1) To kill another person is always murder, and should never

be called anything else. 2) In a war, the members of two rival groups try to murder their opponents. 3) If there is such a thing as a just war, then murder can be necessary for the sake of justice.[12]

But what Bernard Crick, a biographer of Orwell's, points out is that what Orwell is disapproving of is Auden's use of the adjective "necessary."[13] Orwell had "no compunction about killing fascists," explains Crick, but he objected to "the Marxist determinism of 'necessary'" (250). It is interesting that this is precisely what later bothered Auden about "Spain 1937," and he revised the poem to rid it of all such traces. After the summer of 1939, writes his biographer, Auden dropped "necessary History" from his work. He could no longer see "the movement of History as a simple struggle between rising and dying forces" (Mendelson, 323).

The debate over Auden's poem has been a lively one and one that has taken many turns. For instance, where Orwell takes Auden to task in "Inside the Whale," E.P. Thompson links Orwell to Auden in his essay, "Outside the Whale" (1960), and takes them both to task.[14] Thompson notes that Orwell's

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[12]Edward Mendelson, Early Auden (New York: Viking Press, 1981), p.322.

[13]Bernard Crick, Letter to the Editor (in defense of Orwell against Rushdie's attack in an earlier issue) in Granta 12, 1984, 250.

[14]E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale" in Out of Apathy (London: Stevens, 1960), 211-243.

"Inside the Whale" was written at the same time Auden's "Spain 1937" was revised. Orwell's prophecy in the essay, that "the passive attitude will come back," strikes a chilling chord in Thompson, who sees Orwell's mind entering "a similar pattern of default" as Auden's. Thompson likens Orwell's political pessimism to Auden's spiritual pessimism.[15]

In light of the literary history of the thirties, Orwell decided in "Inside the Whale" that literature would do better to stay out of politics. He is not saying, as some would have him, that literature and politics should not mix. He is saying that they do mix, and that sometimes the results are

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[15]Space does not permit a detailed discussion of Thompson's essay, but, in brief, Auden's revision of "Spain 1937" is an example for Thompson of what he calls "the first stage of regress" (disenchantment with Communism), which leads eventually to "the negation of man." He criticizes Auden for excising the two verses in "Spain 1937" in which a resolution to the conflict in Spain was offered. Auden's resolution was "that the meaning of history will be determined by the outcome of that conflict [the Spanish war] and the outcome will be a product of the human actions and choices that the Spanish war symbolizes" (216). But by 1940, Auden, like Orwell, came to feel that "purposive historical commitment" (which Thompson defines as "a redemption of man through political action"), was unlikely (218).

Thompson admits he is not disputing "the authenticity" of either Orwell's or Auden's response but the "default implicit in them": both confront a problem then give it up (219). This, Thompson warns, leads to the second stage of regress, "capitulation to the status quo," which, in turn, leads to "an ideology purged of social referents" - quietism (228). The war, after all, was won, writes Thompson, and it was not won by quietists but by people who believed in Auden's "illusion" that "they were actors in a critical contest in history" (228). Thompson's point is that "whether you are inside the whale" like Orwell, or regard all whales "as transient details" like Auden, "you are not going to worry much about navigation" (229).) Quietism for him is an indefensible position, only a step away from misanthropy (234).

bad, both for literature and for politics. Orwell's central concern in this section of his essay is with the writer's increasing allegiance to orthodoxy, particularly, Communist orthodoxy. While he concedes that in 1935 it was hard to be "politically indifferent," he finds it difficult to understand why writers would be attracted by "a form of socialism that makes mental honesty impossible" (568). For literature, being "an individual thing," demands not only mental honesty but "a minimum of censorship" (568). And Orwell believes that orthodoxy of any kind, but particularly that kind demanded by a political party of its loyal members, is disastrous for writers because it confronts them with the alternative: "toe the line, or shut up" (568). Orwell's point is that to be truly a writer, one can't write to order and can't be a slave to an ideology.

Orwell is not against commitment altogether, but against the kind of commitment practiced by Communist writers in England in the thirties: a facile leftism which he felt hampered the production of literature because it was primarily an intellectual response to experience rather than a directly-felt one. It is the kind of commitment, Orwell suggests in the essay, that results not so much from moral conviction as from an overwhelming need to believe in something (565). While Orwell admits that group loyalties are necessary, he also feels that they are a threat to literature, so long as

literature is the product of individuals.[16] Good novels, he concludes in "Inside the Whale", are not written by "orthodoxy sniffers," but by people who "are not frightened."

This is a point which takes Orwell back to Miller and to the third section of his essay. Tropic of Cancer is interesting because it marks a decided swing away from "the political animal" back to an "individualistic" viewpoint. Orwell refers to a meeting he had with Miller in Paris in 1935. Orwell was on his way to Spain to fight and Miller told him that to do such a thing out of "a sense of obligation" was "sheer stupidity." Orwell's ideas about combatting Fascism and saving democracy were dismissed by Miller as "boloney." Reflecting back on this incident, Orwell now understands Miller's attitude and sees that everywhere in his work "there is the sense of the approaching cataclysm, and almost everywhere the implied belief that it doesn't matter" (569). Miller is fiddling while Rome is burning, but "fiddling with his face towards the flames" (570).[17]

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[16]See Orwell's "The Prevention of Literature" in Inside the Whale and Other Essays (London: Secker and Warburg, 1962), pp.159-74 for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between literature and individualism.

[17]Now it may seem here that Orwell is supporting Miller's politics by supporting his novel, but that is not the case. As Bernard Crick points out, Orwell is making the point that even people with "awful" politics like Miller can be good writers. That in turbulent political times, writers must distinguish between their responsibilities as artists and their responsibilities as citizens, but pursue both. If, for instance, as Bernard Crick explains with a quotation from Orwell, a writer were asked to write propaganda (as Orwell was at the BBC):

Orwell then remarks on an essay of Miller's on the diaries of Anais Nin in which Miller compares her to Jonah in the whale's belly. In the essay, it becomes clear to Orwell that Miller finds the idea of being in the whale's belly an appealing one. Orwell explains why. The whale's belly, he writes,

> is simply a womb big enough for an adult. There you are, in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter what happens. . . . Short of being dead, it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility. And however it may be with Anais Nin, there is no question that Miller himself is inside the whale. All his best and most characteristic passages are written from the angle of Jonah, a willing Jonah. . . . In his case the whale happens to be transparent. Only he feels no impulse to alter or control the process that he is undergoing.

He should do so as a citizen, as a human being, but not as a writer. . . . To suggest that a creative writer, in a time of conflict, must split his life into two compartments, may seem defeatist or frivolous; yet in practice I do not see what else he can do . . . . To yield subjectively, not merely to a party machine, but even to a group ideology, is to destroy yourself as a writer.

Crick finds this "dualism" more practical than demands for total commitment. Orwell's defence of Miller, like his later defence of Pound, exhibits this dualism (Crick, 249-250).

> He has performed the essential Jonah act of allowing himself to be swallowed, remaining passive, accepting. (571-72)

What this amounts to, says Orwell, is "a species of quietism" (572) and he finds himself having to ask if this is a defensible attitude. For the period Orwell is writing in is one in which it has been taken for granted that books ought to be "positive, serious, constructive." In the twenties, this idea would have been laughed at, but now the point has been reached, writes Orwell, where people assert a book can only be "good" if it is founded on a "true" version of life. But Orwell argues that there is never any one body of belief in any age which is the current approximation to the truth. And furthermore, he adds that there exist "good" writers whose "world-view" would in any age be recognized as "silly and false." He takes Edgar Allan Poe as his example. Although the world Poe creates in his stories is bizarre and not "the truth about the world in general," because his stories keep the rules of "their own peculiar world," they are true within a certain framework (573). To write successfully about such a world, says Orwell, you have to believe in it. "Emotional sincerity," it seems, is more important to a creative writer than possession of the "truth."

To clarify what he means by emotional sincerity, he turns to Julien Green's Minuit, a novel he reviewed four years

earlier for The New English Weekly. Orwell attacked Green's novel for ignoring the social and political realities of contemporary life:

> The truth is that ours is not an age for mysterious romances about lunatics in ruined chateaux, because it is not an age in which one can ignore contemporary reality. You can't ignore Hitler, Mussolini, unemployment, aeroplanes and the radio; you can only pretend to do so, which means lopping off a large part of your consciousness.[18]

Four years later, Orwell is championing a novel which blatantly ignores contemporary reality. Four years later, Orwell still dislikes Minuit, but, and this is the significant thing, for different reasons. No longer does he object to Green's turning his back on the world around him. As Alldritt notes, Orwell rejects the work on "aesthetic grounds," revealing a new manner of "understanding both literature and experience":

> One sees the difference immediately if one compares Poe's Tales with what is, in my opinion, an insincere attempt to work up a similar atmosphere, Julien

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[18]Quoted by Keith Alldritt in The Making of George Orwell (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1969), pp. 134-35.

> Green's Minuit. The thing that immediately strikes one about Minuit is that there is no reason why any of the events in it should happen. Everything is completely arbitrary; there is no emotional sequence. But this is exactly what one does not feel with Poe's stories. (573)

And here we get to the heart of one of Orwell's most crucial points. The reason Miller, Forster and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are singled out in "Inside the Whale" is because of their "emotional sincerity." Different from propagandists, these are writers who make you feel rather than telling you how you ought to feel (547). "Emotional sincerity" may, in our sophisticated time, be a phrase destined to make a critic wince, but it is a value of critical importance to Orwell in light of the glut of bad, because not directly-felt, writings produced during the thirties.

Orwell repeats his earlier point that the good books about World War I were made out of the soldier's "helplessness and his ignorance" rather than "out of a pretended power to see the whole thing in perspective" (574). Orwell extends his point to assert that the best books written during the war were the work of people "who tried not to notice that the war was happening" (574).

E.M. Forster was praised by Orwell for refusing to jump on

either the right or left bandwagon. He chose, rather, to stand midway between the reactionaries and the revolutionaries, thereby being one of those writers who remained true to himself. Orwell quotes a comment made by Forster after having read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1917. Forster writes of how heartening it was at such a time to read a poem "so innocent of public-spiritedness" (574). He contended that a writer who could "turn aside to complain of ladies and drawing-rooms preserved a tiny drop of our self-respect" and "carried on the human heritage" (574).

Orwell then quotes MacNeice (one of the "movement" poets) who suggests that the poets of his generation protested more effectively than Eliot did by "publishing 'Prufrock' at the moment when the Allied armies were assaulting the Hindenburg line" (575). But Orwell defends Prufrock and Forster by asserting that

> in 1917 there was nothing that a thinking and sensitive person could do, except remain human, if possible. And a gesture of helplessness, even of frivolity, might be the best way of doing that. (575)

He, like Forster, would have felt it "a relief" to hear a "human" voice, no matter how feeble, after all "the bayonet drills, bombs and recruiting posters." And Miller's work is

similarly appreciated, his voice being close to expressing what some people do feel amidst all the slogans. At the moment of writing his essay, Orwell asserts that "the disintegration of society and helplessness of the people is the truth"; therefore, Miller's passive, non-cooperative attitude is justified: "whether or not it is an expression of what people ought to feel, it probably comes somewhere near to expressing what they do feel" (575).

What is significant about all three of these writers for Orwell (like the writers of books about World War I) is that they are writing out of something they know and feel rather than out of a contrived omniscience. They are offering "subjective truths," not "sermons." Against these writers are those intellectuals who mouth slogans irresponsibly, who misuse language to serve a political end. It seems, then, that according to Orwell, one of the writer's central responsibilities is to use language wisely and carefully to communicate what he or she really believes in, thereby connecting up with the commmon reader and citizen.

What is so important about Miller for Orwell is that he has refused to falsify his feelings to suit an orthodoxy. Miller epitomizes Orwell's point in "The Prevention of Literature" that a writer is neither "a mere entertainer" nor "a venal hack" who can "switch from one line of propaganda to another as easily as an organ grinder changing tunes" but is an individual who must manifest "intellectual liberty" (166).

As Orwell explains in the same essay,

> . . . literature is doomed if liberty of thought perishes. Not only is it doomed in any country which retains a totalitarian structure; but any writer who adopts the totalitarian outlook, who finds excuses for persecution and the falsification of reality, thereby destroys himself as a writer. (174)

World War II broke out while Orwell was writing "Inside the Whale," but "war or no war," he wrote, "what is happening is the break-up of laissez-faire capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture" (576). The movement of history Orwell foresaw was not a movement towards a socialist future but towards a totalitarian one in which the "autonomous individual" would be "stamped out" (576). The impulse of despair, so strong in Orwell at the time of writing "Inside the Whale," mades him proclaim that it was no longer "a writer's world." A writer would not take part in bringing a new society into being as a writer, for "as a writer he is a liberal, and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism" (576).

Miller was singular because he "saw and proclaimed this long ago." So it follows that his passive attitude became important, at least to Orwell. To write as Miller wrote (and Orwell was not calling Miller a "great" writer), as if one

were "inside the whale," became for Orwell the "only formula left for a sensitive writer to adopt" (577), given the historical circumstances as Orwell saw them. It was difficult for him to imagine, given his sense of the impending future, a novel on more constructive, positive lines that would not be "emotionally spurious."

Most readers of "Inside the Whale" are likely to be understanding of the fact that the horrors of Orwell's age probably instilled in him the bleak view of history that governs his essay and likewise affected his perceptions of politics and political solutions. But understanding his views does not mean we have to accept them. For example, the writer as "autonomous individual" and "liberal" has not been "stamped out." Even in totalitarian societies like South Africa, writers like Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee are creating good, and, in their separate ways, committed, prose works. Orwell's aversion in "Inside the Whale" to politics and political language is obvious in such denunciations as "progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindles" and the famous "politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia" from "Politics and the English Language," but this, as Rushdie will argue, is because he is defining politics too narrowly. We also have to question Orwell's own care with the language in his essay, not only with reference to his pronouncements on politics and

history but to his choice of a title. Is "inside the whale" a useful metaphor for describing the relationship of the writer to history? It has, after all, prompted a number of critics to come back at Orwell, inverting his title to "Outside the Whale," and in the process, often distorting the finer points of his essay. And does the metaphor accurately sum up Orwell's position? To be in the whale's belly is "the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility" for Orwell, and there is no doubt that Miller himself is "inside the whale." But Orwell's use of the word "irresponsibility" seems provocative rather than responsible. To accept the world process as Miller does and not feel compelled to do anything about it is surely not as easy as all that. While "acceptance" is clearly a "passive" attitude rather than a "strenuous" one for Orwell, it is, and this is one of the most positive points to be drawn from "Inside the Whale," an attitude that in some contexts requires courage, independence of mind and vigilance, values Orwell found lacking in "committed" literature of the thirties.

While there is a tremendous difficulty in knowing what one really feels about things, particularly when one is in a situation in which one is being barraged by calls to take sides, it is important to Orwell that, above all, a writer be faithful to individual experience. Clearly, it is not the writer's responsibility to pretend, or to engage in rhetoric, in sloganeering: clearly the writer must avoid all kinds of

dishonesty, emotional as well as intellectual. Orwell argues then that one of the writer's primary responsibilities is to avoid abstract formulas and never forget the dangerous possibility of falsifying experience.

One of the most recent in a series of essays written in response to Orwell's "Inside the Whale" is Salman Rushdie's "Outside the Whale"(1984).[19] Rushdie is a living reminder of recent history; he is an Indian now living in England whose latest novels are set in India and Pakistan, and whose most recent work is set in Nicaragua. "Outside the Whale" begins as a satiric attack on "Raj revisionism" -- the production of movies, TV movies and novels depicting the days of British rule in India -- then reveals itself as a heated response to Orwell's essay. Like Orwell's, Rushdie's essay reads like a manifesto and it raises, as Orwell's does, the question of the writer's responsibility, but this time in the contemporary world.

Rushdie begins by linking the "Raj revival" industry to the rise of conservatism in Britain. Individuals responsible for the film Gandhi and for the TV movies The Jewel and The Crown and The Far Pavilions are severely chided, among others, for their participation in an industry whose main project,

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[19]Also published in 1984 was a collection of essays on Orwell edited by Christopher Norris and titled Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views from the Left (London: Lawrence and Wishart).

according to Rushdie, seems to be adding "to the very long line of fake portraits inflicted by the West on the East" (126).

What Rushdie particularly objects to is the format of these "revisionist" enterprises, which, he says, tend to be fixed as follows: with Indians getting "occasional walk-on parts," but generally remaining "bit-players" in their own history. The casting of The Far Pavilions (M.M. Kaye's book which, according to Rushdie, has been "pureed" into "easy-swallow, no-chewing-necessary drivel" by "the great processing machines of TV-soap opera") is a brazen example of Rushdie's point and, as such, is powerfully ridiculed:

> . . . Indian actors were allowed to play the villains (Saeed Jaffrey, who has turned the Raj revival into a personal cottage industry, with parts in Gandhi and The Jewel and The Crown as well, did his hissing and hand-rubbing party piece; and Such Gupta played the selfish princess, but unlucky for her, the entire part consisted of the interminably repeated line, 'Ram, Ram'). Meanwhile the good-guy roles were firmly commandeered by Ben Cross, Christopher Lee, Omar Sharif, and, most memorably, Amy Irving as the good princess, whose make-up artist obviously believed that Indian princesses dip their eyes in black ink and get sun-tans on their lips. (128)

One might, at this point, remember the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, and his similar criticism of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Africans' input into their own history is reduced to two fragments of broken speech uttered by a cannibal: "Catch 'im, eat 'im"; and by a cabin boy: "Mista Kurtz, he dead." Achebe believes the reason for the success of Conrad's novel in Europe and America is

> simply that it fortifies your fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all. And it is set in Africa and teems with Africans whose humanity is admitted in theory but totally undermined by the mindlessness of its context and the pretty explicit animal imagery surrounding it.[20]

What both critics seem to be objecting to in their respective cases is an absence of sensitivity to the details and complexities of the native experience in the fictions. Instead of attempting to understand it, the authors demote it to a lesser status. Thus, Rushdie concludes, referring to the

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[20]Chinua Achebe, "Impediments to Dialogue Between North and South" in Okike (Nigeria) No.16 (November 1979), 10. It should be noted, however, that I think Heart of Darkness is a more serious work than the ones Rushdie attacks.

depiction of Indians in fiction by non-Indians, what such depictions seem to be insisting is that "the Brits are the ones whose stories matter," and for him, the overall effect of such stories is "rather like a literary version of Mulligatawny soup. [They try] to taste Indian but [end] up being ultra-parochially British, only with too much pepper" (127).

What also fuels his anger over these biased portrayals is a concern with the power of films and TV, and the expectations these media generate because they have world-wide audiences. "Stereotypes are easier to shrug off," he explains, "if yours is not the culture being stereotyped; or, at the very least, is your culture has the power to counterpunch against the stereotype" (126).

In a recent essay entitled "The Rage for the Raj," Anita Desai reinforces some of Rushdie's concerns.[21] The India that is being presented in the media is "India-of-the-West, by-the-West and for-the-West" and the Indians being presented are anglicized ones. Any attempt to create a wholly Indian character, in her opinion, "fails apallingly" (28). She observes that the camera distorts the truth as well as the memory:

. . . the physical aspects [of India] are captured,

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[21]Anita Desai, "The Rage for the Raj" in The New Republic, November 25, 1985, 26-30.

> but devoid of temperature, climate, texture, odor. It is as if the rough homespun rags on our bodies, with their stains, are all turned to silk, satin, brocade. It works the other way, too. Real jewelry is reduced to junk, to tinsel; independent people with lives of their own, and minds and views become subservient, peripheral, in order to let the heroes and heroines stand out. One can only view it all as one might a picture on a wall, that can be admired or loathed but not felt or experienced. (28)

Desai uncovers a valuable point when she indicates that Rushdie's loud and angry reaction against Western versions of India is not because he has set himself up as "Britain's Angry Young Spokesman of the Dark Races," but because "he has a passion for history" (28) -- she points to Rushdie's two most recent novels as evidence -- and because he believes such "notions of history must be quarrelled with, as loudly and embarrassingly as possible" ("Outside the Whale," 128).

And so he quarrels with them in "Outside the Whale," arguing that politics and literature don't exist in a vacuum; that for every text, there is a context, and "the rise of Raj revisionism, exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, is the artistic counterpart to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain" (130). "If books and films could be made and consumed in the belly of the

whale," Rushdie writes, " it might be possible to consider them merely as entertainment, or even, on occasion, as art" (130). But since they are not, he finds it necessary to raise a fuss, "name rubbish as rubbish," and get involved.

One might be led, after all this, to ask why then don't Indians present a "true" picture of India? Desai, unfortunately, is forced to give this awkward answer: "The West is not interested in the India of Indians" (30). She cites two examples to back up her claim: a performance of the classical dance form of Kathakali in Washington which, according to a review in one of the city's papers, sent "a handpicked audience of 2,500 of high society glitterati at the Kennedy Center to sleep"; and an Indian film of the Raj, Satyajit Ray's film version of Tagore's The Home and the World, which has enjoyed "a polite but hardly enthusiastic reception" in England, France and the United States (30). Desai is compelled to conclude that

> the general public is willing to accept and enjoy only the India that comes in sugar coating, easy to swallow . . . . It is as far, in any event, as most Europeans and Americans wish to go. Beyond that, they feel, lies the jungle. . . . To go beneath that surface is to descend into the alarming darkness of its many languages, religious castes, tribes, myths, legends, and customs -- into that basket of coiled snakes and

those temples of many-limbed gods that no one wishes to disturb. (30-31)

After expressing his anger over Western versions of India and Indians, Rushdie then moves to summarize Orwell's essay, after which he sets out to dispute some of the claims he believes Orwell is making about the relationship between politics and literature. It should be made clear that Rushdie attributes many of the ideas in his essay to a group discussion involving, among others, Stephen Spender (132). Spender, of course, was one of the movement writers of the thirties. For Rushdie, "Inside the Whale" is clearly advocating quietism; it is for keeping literature out of politics; thus, he feels bound to rail against it.

As we saw in the discussion of "Inside the Whale," Rushdie disagrees with Orwell's labelling of the "ordinary man" as "victim."[22] He also disputes Orwell's reading of Auden's phrase "necessary murder" and attempts to clarify what Auden meant by it (132). But one of Rushdie's most central objections is to Orwell's choice of Henry Miller as a quietist model. He contends that Orwell's argument is significantly weakened by this selection and claims that the work of Auden, Spender and company is more likely to be read today than that of "old Henry," "the happy pornographer" (133). On the basis

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[22]Rushdie quite pointedly includes ordinary women in his challenge to Orwell's definition of "the ordinary man."

of this unargued assertion, Rushdie concludes that "politically-committed art can actually prove more durable than messages from the stomach of the fish" (133).

But Rushdie is more convincing when, like E.P. Thompson before him, he draws attention to Orwell's narrow use of the term "politics." After citing a few examples, Rushdie decides that "'politics' was [for Orwell] a portmanteau term which included everything he hated; no wonder he wanted to keep it out of literature" (134). And like Thompson, Rushdie is understanding of the pessimism that must have been unavoidable considering the time in which Orwell was writing, a pessimism which necessarily leaked into his perceptions of politics and political solutions.

While Rushdie is not blaming Orwell for capitulating to "a kind of defeatism and despair," at the same time he admits that he must dispute Orwell's conclusions for they are built on "intellectual defeat" (134). The acquiscence he sees Orwell as recommending is "no good," "for the truth is," according to Rushdie, that "passivity always serves the interests of the status quo" (135). In the post-1940 world, the world we are in and that Rushdie is writing in, the passive position is obsolete and indefensible.

Rushdie does find it strange that the author of Animal Farm should have been reluctant to admit that literature is best able to defend language "precisely by entering the

political arena" (135).[23] After citing efforts by Gunter Grass and Joseph Heller, Rushdie makes the important point that

> . . . the writer need not always be the servant of some beetle-browed ideology. He can also be its critic, its antagonist, its scourge. From Swift to Solzhenitsyn, writers have discharged this role with honour. (136)

For the fact is, that according to Rushdie, there is no whale, nowhere to hide. He confronts us with a very clear choice: either we delude ourselves or "make the very devil of a racket" (136). And so, instead of Jonah's womb, Rushdie recommends to the writer

> the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanly possible. Where Orwell wished quietism, let there be rowdyism; in place of the whale, the protesting wail. (136)

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[23]Perhaps it hasn't been stressed enough, but Orwell was not for keeping literature out of politics, nor was he against literature "taking sides". He was against literature thoughtlessly taking sides. A writer must know what he or she really feels before writing. The time to figure out one's political sensibilities is not the time when one takes the pen to paper.

Rushdie denies he is saying that all literature must now be of this "noisy, protesting type," but also maintains that it seems to him "imperative" that literature "take sides." Reality is a politically contentious issue and "outside the whale" -- in the dialectic of history -- there is

> a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. (137)

Rushdie does not deal explicitly in his essay with those issues raised by Orwell on the writer's responsibility, but he does, like Orwell, feel that one of the responsibilities of the writer is to challenge false representations of reality. Orwell understands that these false portraits are often due to a split between intellect and feeling, hence, his emphasis on emotional sincerity. Whereas for Rushdie what comes out of his dismay over the false portraits of India and Indians is the implied point that it is the responsibility of the writer to pursue the truth as best as he or she can. Such a pursuit becomes increasingly problematic, however, when a writer attempts to write about "the other" (as in the case of certain British writers writing about the "Raj"), and particularly, as will be discussed in the chapters on Gordimer and Coetzee, when writing in a South African context. Furthermore, the

issue of liberalism raised by Orwell seems to be an irrelevant one for Rushdie. The world process has changed since Orwell wrote his essay, and in our time, Rushdie insists, the writer can't afford not to take a side. Rushdie persuades us that the primary responsibility of the writer is to be "political": to enter into arguments about reality. This is the form responsibility takes if politics is broadly defined.

Rushdie's context is "the shrinking world" Orwell foresaw in "Inside the Whale." It is a world where there are no boundaries or sidelines to huddle on, and no whale's bellies to curl up in. We are all, insists Rushdie, as citizens, as readers and as writers, "part of the crowd, part of the ocean, part of the storm" (137). And we are thus obliged, by the network of complicity that implicates us all in a single crisis, to enter the fray as vigorously as we can.

Before turning to the next three chapters, which will focus on questions of the writer's responsibility in a South African context, it might be useful to explain how I understand Orwell, a "first world" writer, "fitting" in such a context. Clearly Orwell was writing out of an historically governed situation and would not be familiar with our conception of the so-called "third" world or with the South African dilemma in our time, but he was no stranger to colonialism. And the situation of South Africa is colonialism at its most extreme. The following discussions of several

novels by Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee will consider, among other things, the relevance of Orwell's recommendations in this context and whether or not the writers are explicitly political enough in Rushdie's terms.

Making the "Essential Gesture": Nadine Gordimer's The Conservationist

This chapter and the next will explore Nadine Gordimer's writing as "gesture" with reference to two of her novels: The Conservationist and Burger's Daughter. Gordimer's essay, "The Essential Gesture" (which takes its title from a phrase in Roland Barthes' Writing Degree Zero) will therefore first be discussed in some detail. In the essay, Gordimer raises questions concerning the writer's responsibility in a South African context, questions that re-open the issue taken up by Jean-Paul Sartre in What is Literature? and by Roland Barthes in Writing Degree Zero. Before examining Gordimer's essay, a few comments on the differences between Sartre and Barthes over the nature of the writer's responsibility might be useful. This way we can see how Gordimer is situated in the debate and how she then re-thinks it to meet the needs of her historical situation.

In the period following the Second World War, the issue of the writer's responsibility was most famously raised in France by Jean-Paul Sartre who, pressured by the problems of his time and place, felt compelled in his manifesto of 1947 to prescribe some specific functions to the writer.[1] The writer of prose, to be precise, for the writer of poetry could not be

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[1]Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature? Translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman (New York; Philosophical Library, 1949).

"engaged" in Sartre's sense because, unlike prose, poetry, he believed, was not utilitarian. Sartre believed that by refusing to "use" language, poetry withdraws the reader from, rather than confronts her with, the human condition. Of course, many poets would dispute this conclusion -- Pablo Neruda for one. For him, poetry is an effective political tool precisely because it "uses" language, and one of these uses can be subversive. Many contemporary black South African poets -- among them, Dennis Brutus -- would also question Sartre's dismissal of poetry in the context of engaged writing. Brutus would argue that poetry is all the more suited to committed writing (especially in South Africa) because its form allows for a more concentrated expression of ideas and also because it tends to escape the attention of censors more than novels because of its smaller audience. More recently, E.P. Thompson, in an essay on commitment in Stand, declared that poetry, not prose, is the vehicle for "disclosing and defining the values" on which our present day commitments should be based.[2] He argues that "our sense of political reality . . . has become lost within faded rhetoric and threatening abstractions, and poetry, most of all, is what we now need" (54). Still, what we are interested in here is not so much Sartre's view of poetry as his ideas about political engagement.

Sartre made a similar declaration to the one Rushdie was

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[2]E.P. Thompson, "Comment" in Stand 20, No. 3, 1986, 50.

to make in "Outside the Whale." That is, that writers must take a position "for literature is, in essence, a taking of position" (278). The words of the engaged writer are actions for Sartre: "to name is to show; to show is to change" (23). Again, there are many writers who would dispute this assertion; they would argue that by writing, one can't possibly change anything. To believe so is to be idealistic or romantic. However, writers in various times and places have been and are persuaded by the idea that writing can effect a change, if only in the hearts and minds of their readers. Alan Paton comes to mind with his novel Cry the Beloved Country, which was published shortly after the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa in 1948. While the novel didn't change anything structurally, it aided in making readers both inside and outside South Africa aware of the horrors of apartheid. Consider as well the impact of South African authors like Andre Brink and Nadine Gordimer, whose audiences are largely white, and who choose to write about, among other things, the inadequacies and deficencies of certain white perspectives and political positions.

Sartre also recommended the idea "of going beyond one's age to write of an immediate future" (155). That Gordimer takes the imaginative leaps required to practice this suggestion is evidenced by two recent novels, July's People (1981) and A Sport of Nature (1987), which are set in post-revolution South Africa and an unnamed liberated African

country respectively. It was Sartre's hope that in being aware of the problems of her time and place, the writer might then provide a solution to them in her work.

Barthes' conception of commitment as revealed in Writing Degree Zero is more subtle than Sartre's.[3] While Writing Degree Zero is not explicitly a response to What is Literature? (Sartre's book is not mentioned in Barthes' book), in her preface to Writing Degree Zero, Susan Sontag maintains that it is implicitly so.[4] Jonathan Culler in his study of Barthes suggests the same and says that what Barthes is doing in Writing Degree Zero is providing "an alternative story" to Sartre's "capsule history" of literature, one that leads to a different evaluation of contemporary literature and the notion of commitment.[5]

While Barthes recognizes that the choice of writing amounts to a choice as to where a writer wants to situate his or her language, he feels Sartre suppresses the idea that every writer's choice always faces in two directions: toward society and toward the literature. The writer's choice, writes Barthes, hinges on a way of conceiving literature -- it

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[3]Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero. Translated from the French Le Degre Zero de L'Ecriture 1953 by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

[4]Sontag points, for instance, to the fact that both the first chapter of Sartre's book and the first section of Barthes' have the same title, "What is Writing?" (xi).

[5]Jonathan Culler, Barthes (Great Britain: Fontana, 1983), p.25.

is "a matter of conscience, not of efficacy" (15). The writer's choice, her mode of writing, is what Barthes calls "ecriture," and it is distinct from language and style. As Culler explains,

> an author's language is something he inherits, and his style is a personal, perhaps subconscious network of verbal habits and obsessions, but his mode of writing, or ecriture, is something he chooses, from the possibilities historically available. (28)

"Ecriture", then, is "a social use of literary form," and hence has political implications. The political significance of writing is not, as Sartre would have it, simply a matter of content or of an author's personal political commitment but also of "the work's engagement with a culture's literary ordering of the world" (Culler, 31). Formal experimentation, then, like attempts by modernists (whom Sartre was attacking in What is Literature?) to write anti-literary literature and achieve "writing degree zero" can also be a mode of commitment.[6]

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[6]Barthes is skeptical of Sartre's idea of a lasting revolutionary writing, so his suggestion is to "disengage" literary language (76). He proposes the creation of a "colourless writing", which is what he means by "writing degree zero." It would be a "neutral" writing which would "go beyond Literature" in becoming a "transparent form of speech" (77). Barthes attributes the initiation of this neutral writing to Camus' The Outsider. "L'ecriture blanche" was first mentioned by Sartre in reference to the same novel of

In "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer undertakes to answer the question of the writer's responsibility as it pertains to her historical situation.[7] Understanding along with Barthes that a writer's choice always faces in two directions--towards society and towards literature -- Gordimer wrestles with the problem of how to reconcile those demands from without to be socially responsible with those demands from within concerning artistic integrity.[8] She makes it clear that the problem is a particularly complicated one when the society one is writing in is South Africa.[9]

For living in South Africa, as Gordimer describes it in

Camus' but Sartre saw it as a refusal of commitment. For Barthes, however, the "revolutionary" potential of literature lies in its ability to question itself and the conventions by which culture orders the world. Further, the writer is "entirely committed" only when "his poetic freedom take its place within a verbal condition whose limits are those of society and not those of a convention or a public"(83).

[7]Nadine Gordimer, "The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility" in Granta 15 (Spring 1985), 137-51.

[8]Gordimer also casts the question in other words, Camus's words: how does a writer reconcile the demand from without to be "more than a writer" with the demand from within to be "only a writer?"

[9]The social demands made on the writer in North America, for instance, would not be like the demands made on the writer in South Africa, and the problem of how they would be met might not be as critical a one for North American writers as for South African writers. The social demand on a writer in South Africa might for example call upon her to write on a subject that would result in her being banned, detained or forced into exile. As Gordimer explains in the essay, "there is no responsibility arising out of the status of the writer as a social being that could call upon Saul Bellow, Kurt Vonnegut, Susan Sontag, Toni Morrison or John Berger to write on a subject that would result" in the same (138).

another essay, is "living in the interregnum" -- in the space "between two social orders and two identities, the one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined."[10] In this precarious situation, the question of the writer's responsibility becomes even more vexing. For how, as a writer, does one put oneself into a meaningful relationship with a society that is not yet born? Clearly in the interregnum that characterizes South Africa, there arises, both from without and within, different sets of demands for black and for white writers.

Because the future holds "different things for different colours," the result, according to Gordimer, is that black writers find themselves "in history" ("Interregnum," 26). (I presume by this that Gordimer means they find themselves in the emergent history). Abruptly situated in Sartre's sense, they find the values of their historical situation taking precedence over the "transcendent" values of art (26). Their "soon-to-be-born" society demands this of them as writers; thus, says Gordimer, black South African writers come closest to reconciling the outer and inner demands. Because, as they are writing, they are also being politically active. They are teaching, organizing, and proselytizing ("The Essential

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[10]Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum" in The New York Review of Books (January 20, 1983), 21. The title of Gordimer's essay is taken from Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, and it serves, in part, as the epigraph to her novel, July's People (1981). The entire epigraph reads: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms."

Gesture," 141). They can put themselves into a meaningful relationship with the black predicated society by being "only" writers.

Gordimer is not saying that all black writers in South Africa have accepted the demand from without (which she calls "responsibility as orthodoxy") as the only way to make their essential gesture as social beings. Many have begun -- she cites Ez'kia Mphalele and Ahmed Essop as examples -- "to negotiate the right to their own inner interpretation of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle" (144).

It is clearly a different matter for white writers in South Africa who, to use Gordimer's phrase, find themselves "out of history." Nevertheless, she insists that they too must struggle, but in their own way, to attempt the same position black artists aim for:

> tc be seen as relevant by, and become committed to, commonly understood, commonly created cultural entities corresponding to a common reality -- which is to say, an indigenous culture.[11]

While Gordimer does not presume to know how white South

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[11]Nadine Gordimer, "Apprentices of Freedom: Relevance and Commitment in South African Arts" in The Writer and Human Rights, ed. by Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 21.

Africans, artists and citizens alike, will "fit in" to the new society, she articulates, through her protagonists in The Conservationist and Burger's Daughter respectively, inadequate and adequate ways of addressing the configurations of a complex historical situation.

Early in her writing career, Gordimer chose as her model, in terms of attitude, those writers of the British liberal tradition, in particular, E.M. Forster.[12] However, when it seemed to her that the possibility of blacks and whites connecting on a personal level was weakened by the brutal government policies of the sixties, Gordimer broke from the Forsterian model because she felt "that kind of English-speaking liberal didn't exist anymore in South Africa."[13] But, by the early seventies, she was to develop what she called an "Africa-centred consciousness."[14] As evidenced in

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[12]Forster, it should be remembered, was one of those writers singled out by Orwell in "Inside the Whale" for his artistic integrity. Unlike other writers of his time, Forster refused to jump on either the right or left bandwagon and thereby remained true to himself.

[13]By "that kind" of English- speaking liberal, Gordimer means agnostics, if not atheists. Forster, she says, was the "ultimate humanist." When asked if she considers Alan Paton to be an English-speaking liberal who has broken with the English liberal tradition, she answers no. She believes Paton was linked more to a missionary tradition, and this didn't have much meaning for her because, as she says, she didn't have any religion. Interviewers: Robert Boyers, Clark Blaise, Terence Diggory, Jordan Elgrably; "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer" in Salmagundi, No.62 (Winter 1984), 11.

[14]Nadine Gordimer, The Black Interpreters (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973), p.5.

the quotation from the previous paragraph, this new vision sees African history as primary and is reflected in her recent fiction.

While conscious of the need for writers to acknowledge certain societal demands, Gordimer does not shirk that other responsibility to artistic integrity, or, to use Orwell's phrase, "emotional sincerity." In a recent interview with her, Robert Boyers refers to a statement that Gordimer made some time ago: "the only dictum I always remember is Andre Gide's 'salvation for the writer lies in being sincere, even against one's better judgement.'" Boyers considers this a remarkable statement and asks Gordimer if she would comment on it. Here is her partial response:

> I think that the decision to be sincere is an artistic one. It's the kind of decision I often face when I'm writing because I have strong political convictions in the country where I live. I am partisan, yes. Sometimes when I'm writing, there will be a character who belongs to 'my' side, the side of radical opposition to apartheid, but who is devious, perhaps exhibitionistic, and represents certain lies that are told on 'my' side, too, for expedience. If I were Lionel Burger I would no doubt say, 'Well, what does this artistic sincerity and integrity matter? What matters is the cause.' But I don't accept that. As a

writer, I feel that my first duty is integrity as an artist. (Salmagundi interview, 4-5)

We can see how Gordimer's integrity, as well as her liberalism, in the Orwellian sense, is revealed in a work like The Conservationist where she portrays as sympathetically as possible a protagonist with a point of view she clearly disagrees with.[15]

Gordimer doesn't abdicate any responsibility in Rushdie's sense, either. Her identification with native history will become evident in the discussion of The Conservationist. As well, she clearly contests in her fiction the "maps" of reality charted by the architects of apartheid, so much so that several of her novels have been banned.[16] The fact that Gordimer continues to live in South Africa and work there as a writer, as she has done for close to fifty years, is evidence enough of her political commitment.

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[15]Despite the fact that Gordimer is writing out of a totalitarian society, which is surely not a writer's society, she is still helping to bring a new society into being through her writing. Orwell didn't think this could be possible. What he saw happening was the destruction of liberalism, and since the writer, as a writer, is a liberal, he felt literature, in the form that we know it, must suffer a "temporary" death. See "Inside the Whale," p.576.

[16]Rushdie urged that one of the responsibilities of the politically committed writer was to make, through her fiction, "new and better maps of reality." The most recent of Gordimer's novels to be banned was Burger's Daughter. For a discussion of the astonishing details of the publishing history of Burger's Daughter, see Sheila Roberts' "South African Censorship and the Case of Burger's Daughter" in World Literature Written in English, Vol. 19, 1980-81, 41-48.

In his study of the political novel since 1945, Robert Boyers devotes a lengthy chapter to discussing why he considers Burger's Daughter to be one of the finest political novels ever written.[17] The Conservationist is mentioned as a point of contrast. Not that it isn't an accomplished novel, but that it isn't strictly a political novel. According to Boyers, The Conservationist is not a political novel because there is no single political idea foregrounded in it. Political implications are everywhere, he concludes, but they remain "in the background," "a climate"; nothing with a specific shape emerges to be addressed (123). Finally, he denies The Conservationist status as a political novel because he believes that its protagonist does not operate in terms of an ideology (123).

While the next chapter will explore Burger's Daughter in light of some of the claims made for it, this chapter will argue that the The Conservationist is a political novel and can be read as such if one looks at what constitutes politics in a broader sense than does Boyers.[18] As well, it will show

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[17]Robert Boyers, Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945 (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.121-146.

[18]See the introduction to Boyers' book for a detailed discussion of what, for him, constitutes a political novel. Boyers accepts the main terms of Irving Howe's description of the political novel (terms which were outlined in Howe's book, Politics and the Novel, published in 1957) but extends them to accomodate the complexities of the contemporary political novel. Those terms of Howe's that Boyers accepts are 1) the

that Mehring, while perhaps not knowingly, does indeed operate in terms of an ideology, and that one of the projects of the novel is to disclose implicitly the weaknesses of an ideology that presumes not to be one. Before turning to The Conservationist to discuss it as a political novel, it might be worthwhile to give some sense of the South African context to which Gordimer's novel was, in large part, a response.

1968 saw the collapse of the Liberal Party in South Africa, and along with it, Gordimer's growing disillusionment with a certain kind of white liberal. The sixties also saw the growth of the Black Consciousness movement which, as Stephen Clingman indicates in his book on Gordimer, "reserved some of its deepest anger for white liberals."[19] The problem

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notion that ideas in a political novel will have "a kind of independent motion"; 2) that "political intrigue is more than a backdrop for the dramas of sensibility" the authors of political novels "wish to unfold"; 3) the personal fates of protagonists are bound up with "social and political arrangements that can be controlled only by those who are capable of intrigue and calculation"; 4) that in political fiction there will be some effort to project an ideal community.

[19]Stephen Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986). In his excellent book, Clingman traces the development of Gordimer's historical consciousness in her fiction from the beginning of her literary career in the early fifties up to the eighties. In his chapter on The Conservationist, he notes that shortly after its publication, Gordimer made it clear in an interview in The Times that she preferred not to be called a liberal but considered herself "a white South African radical." This comment upset Alan Paton, ex-leader of the Liberal Party, who took it as an attack on the Party itself. Clingman makes the point that it was not the Liberal Party Gordimer was attacking, nor what is called the "major tradition of South African liberalism." Rather, what he sees her attacking is a certain kind of liberal, "the fashionable, posturing kind,"

with white liberals? Even if they did present themselves as advocates for the oppressed, they were still part of the system and were therefore guilty of collusion. Thus, Clingman makes the important point that The Conservationist can be understood as an exploration of certain kinds of liberalism--the patronizing liberalism of Mehring and the hypocritical liberalism of Antonia -- and the limits of both. Clingman also notes that it was during this time that the first white farms in pre-independence Zimbabwe were being raided by guerrillas -- an indication that the whites' hold on the land was diminishing in Southern Africa.

Published in 1974, The Conservationist has been recognized by Stephen Clingman as representing "a unique and profound moment in the history of South African consciousness."[20] Among other things, he admires the novel for its strong sense of history. Similarly, for Paul Rich The Conservationist signals an important break from the "constricting idiom" of the white South African colonial tradition.[21] In The

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like Antonia. See pages 144-47 in Clingman for more discussion.

[20]Stephen Clingman, "History from the Inside: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer" in Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 1981), p. 189. This article carries the same title as Clingman's book. It is a more compact discussion of some of the ideas he treats in the book.

[21]Paul Rich, "Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee" in Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol. 9. No. 1 (October 1982), p. 60. Rich links the white South African colonial tradition to the Victorian colonial tradition which retained at its core "an essentially anti-industrial and agrarian view of a rural golden age." The Conservationist is

Conservationist, writes Rich, Gordimer sees the African landscape

> not as a deadening backdrop for the white segregationist imagination but the focus for a liberating African consciousness that will eventually transcend white cultural and political domination. (60)

In the same year but several months after The Conservationist was published, Mozambique was liberated. It was the first in a series of neighbouring states to win its independence through armed struggle. As both Clingman and Rich note, The Conservationist prophesies the coup. The storm in the novel that brings the black corpse to the surface of the farm, to reclaim the land and to frighten Mehring away, blows in, significantly, from Mozambique. That Gordimer should have included this in the novel attests to her, and her fiction's, uncanny historical sense. The time when the novel was written -- before the liberation of Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe, and before the Soweto uprising -- was a time when the balance of history seemed to be swinging, and The

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important for offering a literary alternative to that of the conventional colonial form.

Conservationist registers this swing.[22]

Both Rich and particularly Clingman bring to their readings of The Conservationist their knowledge of the complexities and details of the sociological, historical and political situation of South Africa. In doing so, they convincingly argue for the novel as being explicitly political. Yet there are still other ways in which to look at the novel to argue the same. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will single out for discussion several issues that I feel substantiate the political force of the novel and hence, the force of Gordimer's gesture as artist and as social being.

First, the opening section of The Conservationist will be looked at in some detail to reveal Gordimer's sensitivity and

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[22]Nadine Gordimer, The Conservationist (London: Cape, 1974; New York: Viking, 1975; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation by page number in parentheses.

The Conservationist is largely focused on the consciousness of Mehring, who is a wealthy white businessman and weekend farmer. In fact, most of the novel is taken up by Mehring's ruminations and imaginary conversations with people who were once close to him; in particular, with his ex-mistress, Antonia, a South African liberal living in exile in England, thanks to the help of Mehring's connections. The novel is set very specifically on a South African farm about a half an hour's drive from Johannesburg - a farm to which Mehring wants to retreat. Despite his genuine love for the land, he cannot feel at home on it. There is a black body on his property that haunts Mehring and won't stay underground. When the corpse is finally properly buried by the blacks who have, throughout the novel, been shunning it, they are shown by Gordimer to be taking possession of the land. Mehring has been frightened off the farm, and the blacks, by implication, inherit it.

meticulousness as a novelist, a particular view of her protagonist, and some broadly political concerns. Following this close reading will be a wider discussion of Mehring, of the others with whom he shares the South African soil and of their relationships to each other as well as to the land. I will then turn to explore the inadequacies of Mehring's consciousness in relation to his historical situation. Through an examination of these issues, I hope to prove that while raising crucial political questions, Gordimer is at the same time meeting those demands from within of artistic integrity, or, to use Orwell's phrase, of "emotional sincerity." I will end with an analysis of Gordimer's treatment of the black world in the novel, a treatment that embodies her "Africa-centred consciousness" and clearly marks her as a writer fulfilling her responsibilities as a social being.

I

It was Henry James (a novelist to whom Gordimer has often been compared) who believed that the writer's greatest responsibility was to exercise care, both in observing and in rendering the observations. That Gordimer meets these responsibilities in the opening pages of The Conservationist is certain: she is indeed taking a "careful" look and in doing so makes us look carefully too.

Pale freckled eggs.

> Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning, the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs set out before a half-circle of children. Some are squatting; the one directly behind the eggs is cross-legged, like a vendor in a market. There is pride of ownership in that grin lifted shyly to the farmer's gaze. The eggs are arranged like marbles, the other children crowd round but you can tell they are not allowed to touch unless the cross-legged one gives permission. The bare soles, the backsides of the children have flattened a nest in the long dead grass for both eggs and children.

The novel begins arrestingly, with a fragment, a visual image, by way of which we are quickly engaged. Then, as if behind a camera, Gordimer pulls back from that image to show the larger scene, that context from which the eggs emerge.[23] And just as readers are suddenly drawn into the novel by the eggs, so the farmer "suddenly sees" -- a colon momentarily separating his sighting from the object of his vision -- the clutch of eggs surrounded by several children. The children are in different positions. Most notable is the position assumed by the child

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[23]Michael Wade, in his discussion of the opening scene of the novel, mentions that the perspective is one of "emphatic objectivity" and that the effect is "of a sound film with the soundtrack temporarily expunged." See Wade's Nadine Gordimer (London: Evans Bros., 1978), p. 191.

sitting directly behind the eggs. He or she is "cross-legged," and the simile Gordimer uses to intensify the position is telling, "like a vendor in the market." As well, "there is a pride of ownership" in that child's grin; it is clearly to this child to whom the eggs seem most to belong. If the eggs are to be touched, this is the child who gives permission.

We can also see, in the next paragraph, that the farmer (he is not named until later in the section; he is introduced simply as "the farmer") disapproves of the children's appropriation of the eggs. Instead of driving his car through the gate as he usually does, "he puts on the brake, leaves the engine running and gets out." Before speaking to the children, he observes the shapes and colours of the eggs in the hands of the child as well as the colours of the child's hands. He notices, too, the silence broken by an "awed, snuffling breathing." Although he fails to communicate his feelings to the children (they don't understand his language), the farmer does not want the eggs touched. Because the eggs are on his property, they belong to him. He is the one to give permission if they are to be touched. In the space, then, of several keenly observed paragraphs, Gordimer establishes a subtle conflict through which questions of property, ownership and permission emerge, questions that will recur throughout the novel.

But Gordimer is careful to reveal that the farmer's

motives for keeping the children from the eggs are not necessarily bad or selfish. He is genuinely concerned with conservation. The eggs are in danger of disappearing -- there are only eleven of them --and he wants to protect them. As well, we discover that his knowledge of the land over which he moves is sound: he can read its details, can tell, for example, that "the last late cutting of autumn" must have been made the previous week because of the shrivelled scraps of lucerne that have been left behind. The farmer's sensitivity to the natural world is made plain in such observations as this: "Down along the river, the willows have gone blond, not yet at their palest, combed out into bare strands, but still lightly spattered and delicately streaked with yellow leaves"(11). He is attuned to the sounds and smells of the natural cycles. While down by the reeds, he is aware of the silence and observes that "the seething of the wind through the gneen reeds in summer is seasonal." Back up in the veld, he takes into his lungs with pleasure "the dry, cool and perfect air of a high-veld autumn"(10).

In the last two pages of the opening section, we are taken most completely into the mind of the farmer, and it is here that his concerns and care, at least for nature, are emphasized. The guinea eggs are worth conserving because they are novel, unique, "so different from hen's eggs made to lie in the standard depressions of plastic trays, in dozens, subject to seasonal-price fluctuation" (20). They are

precious to him because they are removed from history and unaffected by its artificial systems; if only he could keep "the bloody dogs" away from them.

Along with his concern for the eggs, Gordimer wants us to look carefully at what else the farmer notices. For instance, he remembers that "the hands of the child round the freckled egg were the colour of the underside of an empty tortoiseshell held up to the light"(20). Here is a man capable of great sensitivity, who measures the rhythms of the farm in lyrical terms like these:

> distance comes back with these reaped fields, the ploughed earth stretching away in fan-shaped ridges to its own horizon; the farm grows in size in winter, just as in summer as the mealies grow taller and thicker the horizon closes in, diminishes the farm until it is a series of corridors between walls of stiff green higher than his head. (20)

Time is all-important on the farm, and the farmer's instincts are good in this respect as well. If success is to be assured, it is necessary to know at what time a particular task has to be done. The time for reaping has past; "now is the time to clear canker weed," for the farmer well knows that if he obeys the demands of nature, dramatic recoveries, like that of his eucaplyptus trees, are possible.

The farmer's attentiveness is not only limited to the subtleties of the natural world -- the shapes and colours of guinea fowl eggs, the changing horizons of the farm. The same kind of attention is exercised toward a man-made object: a windmill. As the narrator observes:

> The windmill is not turning and he releases the chain and arm that brake it in order to set it going, but . . . it does not begin to turn because there is no wind today, the air is still, it is a perfect autumn day. He sets the brake again carefully." (20)

But, oddly enough, where the farmer's responses to the natural world are spontaneous and full of feeling, his responses to a human being, in this section, Jacobus, are shown as clearly ritualised and mechanistic, governed by something other than a natural code, but a code, nevertheless, to which both Jacobus and his boss are sensitive. There is more than a quiet irony underlying Gordimer's detailed observations of the interactions between the farmer and the chief herdsman. The farmer, for instance, is looking for Jacobus: he wants the herdsman to keep the children away from the guinea eggs. As he makes his way across the lucerne field to find Jacobus, he suddenly sees the figure of the black man making for <u>him</u>. This reversal puzzles the farmer; he can't imagine how this situation arose: "But it's <u>he</u> who's looking

for Jacobus; there's a mistake somewhere -- how could the man know already that he is wanted?" (11)

Stubborn in the thought that it is indeed he who is looking for Jacobus, the farmer "continues his own progress, measuredly, resisting the impulse to flag the man down with a wave of the hand, preparing in his mind what to say about the guinea fowl"(11). This is the progress of a man acting, conscious of the impression he wants to make on his audience. It is a "measured" performance; impulse is checked as he rehearses his lines in preparation for meeting Jacobus. Jacobus also understands the nuances of this performance ritual:

> He's panting, naturally; but stops, as if there were a line drawn there, ten feet away from the farmer, and goes through the formalities of greeting, which include a hand-movement as if he had a hat to remove. (11)

Clearly it is Jacobus who is the subordinate in this exchange, and, we can assume, in all exchanges between the men: "each is talking fast, in the manner of a man who has something he wants to get on to say. There is a moment's pause to avoid collision; but of course the right of way is the farmer's" (11).

Not surprisingly, it turns out that Jacobus is looking for

his boss: he has something urgent to say to him but the farmer isn't interested in listening. His mind is on his own carefully prepared guinea-fowl speech; he knows exactly what he wants to say. However, he only gets part of it out before Jacobus blurts out his own news: there is a dead body in the third pasture. While Jacobus's dramatic disclosure has the effect of reducing the farmer's worries to the trivial, there is nevertheless a parallel drawn up by this incident between the farmer's concern for the eggs and Jacobus's concern for the corpse.

The farmer is irritated by Jacobus's news. At first, he doesn't think he should concern himself with the dead man; after all, "it is not one of the farm workers. It is not anyone one knows. It is a sight that has no claim on him" (13). But the undeniable fact <u>is</u> that the dead man is on <u>his</u> property. So he does his duty and follows Jacobus to the spot where the dead man lies. They come upon him "suddenly," as do we, for he is introduced abruptly by an isolated sentence fragment: "The dead man." This is reminiscent of the way we were taken into the novel by another fragment, "Pale freckled eggs." Gordimer seems to be implying a connection between these two subjects, stylistically now as well as thematically. Although they represent contrasting ideas -- the eggs the beginning of life and generation; the corpse the end of life and degeneration -- the link between them is forged by the fact that they are both on the farmer's property. (As well,

the egg motif runs on its own throughout the novel: the pause between the seasons is described as "perfectly contained as an egg"; the pale freckled eggs are arranged "like marbles"; Mehring finds his son's marble on the floor of the farmhouse; Terry gives his mother a jade egg as a gift; Jalal paints an egg-shaped peace sign on the water tower.)

The eye that observed the eggs with such keen precision now observes the corpse:

> One of them. The face is in the tacky mud; the tiny brown ears, the fine, felted hair, a fold or roll where it meets the back of the neck, because whoever he was, he wasn't thin. A brown pinstripe jacket, only the stubs of button-shanks left on the secondhand sleeves, that must once have been part of some white businessman's suit. Smart tight pants and a wide belt of fake snakeskin with fancy stitching. He might be drunk, lying there, this city slicker. But his out-dated "stylish" shoes are on dead, twisted feet, turned in still and brokenly as he was flung down. (15)

The "us and them" dichotomy is conveyed in the first phrase of the description. The dead man is "one of them": a black. Yet within the category of "them" are subdivisions, for the dead man is not one of Jacobus's blacks either: "This is

people from there," he says, "there" being the "location" at the farm's southern boundary. It seems the existence of the dead body on the farm serves to reveal that the attitude of divisiveness is not restricted to whites. Jacobus is as eager to abdicate responsibility for the corpse as the farmer.

Dressed sharply in white man's cast-offs, "this city slicker" might seem to be drunk, lying on the reeds with just a scratch on his neck. But the wonder is that he is not drunk, but dead, and the farmer, instructing Jacobus to leave the body "as it is," proceeds to make the arrangements with the police to get it off his property. The farmer's conversation with the police is interesting in what it reveals. Clearly he differentiates himself from the police's crude version of white supremacy; he views their actions as crass and incompetent. Yet, after he puts the phone down, he keeps his snort of contempt low so that Jacobus won't hear it. White authority, it seems, is not to be brought into disrespect in front of blacks, no matter what he may think himself. As Clingman points out, this is what Antonia, his liberal mistress, calls his 'collusion' (144).

The dead man has property of his own that both Jacobus and Mehring are careful of. Once in the farmhouse, Jacobus formally hands over to his boss the watch and the sunglasses he found on the corpse. Assiduously, Mehring (we now know his surname from the conversation he had with the police) puts the objects into an envelope and secures it and its contents with

a rubber band. "Watch and Glasses, property of dead man," he writes. He then adds, "for the Police . . . ."

The opening section of The Conservationist leads us with great skill into the world of its protagonist's perceptions. Mehring's concern for the natural world is emphasized but so is his difficulty in behaving naturally before the black farm-hand. Questions of possession and property emerge, and the fact of the black corpse's presence on the farm warns of the instability of Mehring's claim to the land. In the following sections of the novel, Gordimer enlarges the world she initially described to include a fuller, less attractive view of her protagonist and a more specific view of South African society.[24]

II

The Conservationist is set on an African farm, one more in a series of farms in South African literature to which, as

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[24]There are four more sections following the opening one before the novel is punctuated by the first in a series of prose quotations from Rev. Henry Callaway's The Religious System of the Amazulu. The second section provides us with a more objective description of Mehring and a detailed description of the landscape and the landmarks surrounding the farm. The third section gives us a glimpse of "petty officialdom." The police have come and buried the body on Mehring's property instead of taking it away. Mehring is outraged but doesn't have the time to hear an explanation because he has to get back to the city for a dinner party. People who move freely , we see, are living amongst those who cannot. In the fourth section, we are in the city, at a middle-class dinner party. Here we get the first hint of Mehring's idle curiosity towards young women. The fifth section takes us into the world of black perceptions; as well, the living arrangements of and the interactions between the blacks and the Indians are described.

Sheila Roberts puts it,

> protagonists try to belong or retreat, searching to establish the comfort of a place they can justifiably possess and through this possession reunite the fragments of their personalities.[25]

This particular farm is owned by a wealthy pig-iron dealer, a member of the white business elite, who runs "like a stray dog" between it and the city which is twenty-five miles away (80). It has on it "a house nobody lives in." The "location," a ghetto for thousands of blacks and a reservoir of cheap labour for employers like Mehring, is very close to the farm, a geographic fact that alarms Mehring's acquaintances, who are otherwise charmed by the idea of a farm of one's own. We are told that many well-off city men buy themselves farms at certain stages in their careers; losses are tax-deductible. The irony clear in these kinds of comments serves in drawing our attention toward the complicity of Mehring's position. His prosperity, and in some sense, the

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[25]Sheila Roberts, "Character and Meaning in Four Contemporary South African Novels" in World Literature Written in English, Vol. 19-20 (1980-81), pp. 24-25. Other critics, including Rich and Clingman, have referred, of course, to Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm in relation to The Conservationist. Schreiner's novel is considered the prototypical South African colonial novel and both Rich and Clingman see Gordimer's novel as a revolt against it. The African farm that Schreiner "settled at once so assuredly and uncertainly returns ¿in Gordimer's novel¿ to those from whom it was dispossessed in the first place" (Clingman book, p. 136).

serenity he enjoys on the farm, is achieved at the expense of the suffering of thousands of others.

To its owner, the farm is many things: among them, it's a good investment; "a place to bring a woman"(47); "beautiful if productive"(23). The house matters least for there is nothing of value in it; it is the land the owner values. Although he thinks he might have paid too much for it at the time, he's sure it's worth a bit now. If the location expands (as he's been warned it might) and his property is expropriated, he's consoled by the fact that he'd likely "make a fortune"(30). Again, the exploitative strains underlying Mehring's particular ethic are being revealed here.

Nearby there are "the locals," the Dutch farmers, who own and work most of the neighbouring farms. Mehring is different from these whites just as he distanced himself from the police:

> It is not that he [Mehring] knows any of them well enough to distinguish one from the other, but he recognizes the strong Afrikaans accent they all have if they speak English, and the authentic mother-tongue intonation if they speak Afrikaans. (48)

Yet Mehring is different from the "locals" in other ways, too. The Afrikaners here described are "real" farmers, just as we can assume their forefathers were. Because of the

generational tradition behind them, they are certainly more "settled" than Mehring, and thus, there is a sense in which their hold on the land is more substantial than his.[26]

On and near Mehring's farm are other living arrangements: the precarious and unauthorized arrangements of the Indians, and the miserable location that the blacks are forced to call home. In taking the time to map out the complex arrangements of the different groups inhabiting the same earth and indicating the dramatic inequities among them, Gordimer is revealing one of the ways in which she is writing in opposition to the novels of the colonial tradition. Whereas Schreiner in The Story of an African Farm never raised the question of possession, rightful possession, the question comes to the fore in The Conservationist. Because it is South African society she is striving to map, Gordimer goes the necessary step further to question the idea of tenure:

> Tenure is a very interesting concept, morally speaking. When you come to think of it, what is tenure? What is "legal" tenure? Blacks take the land for granted, it's simply there. It's theirs, although

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[26] In an interview in Overland 94/95, 1984, Andre Brink points out the similarities between the histories of blacks and the histories of Afrikaners in South Africa. "Both have a sort of rustic, pastoral, almost peasant, nomadic past, both have a very great awareness of the tribal experience and both are very strongly rooted in the realities, the physicalities of Africa." Unfortunately, he goes on to say, blacks and Afrikaners are the "main antagonists" in South Africa.

> they've been conquered; they always were there. They don't have the necessity to say, 'Well I love this land <u>because</u> it's this, that, and the other. (<u>Salmagundi</u> interview, 6)

In the same interview, Gordimer makes the point that the idea of tenure is a white creation: whites are always having to assert their claim to the land because their claim is based on a piece of paper -- a deed of sale. And what is a deed of sale when people have first of all taken a country by conquest? The implications of this question underlie some of the concerns of the novel.

"The dogs held within their ring of savagery the Indians' store, house and family, and the blacks in the yard, surrounded together. It was the Indians' only form of tenure . . . (114). The Indians' hold on the land in South African is clearly a tenuous one, and, as revealed in the novel, always at the mercy of "a white man with the right to serve an eviction order" (115). Bismallah's plight is probably representative of the plight of Indians in South Africa. He is forced to pay off a white lawyer whose job it is to keep a step ahead of the "official visit" -- a visit which may decide that the area Bismallah has his home and occupation in be designated White or White by Occupation, thus resulting in forced removal.

In order to get around the act which designates areas as

White, the Indians want Mehring to put the shop in his name. Mehring's son, Terry, wants to know what his father is going to do about the request. Mehring shrugs off any obligation with this contemptuous remark:

> These Indians run rings round anybody when it comes to palm-greasing. They know how to survive. Well! They'll find some Van der Merwe who won't turn his nose up at coolie money, no matter what he says about them to his Boer pals. I'll just give the shop a wide berth, that's all. (137)

Look at the lengths to which so-called "non-whites" must go, Gordimer seems to be saying to us through her presentation of such situations, look at the humiliations they must bear because of the white claim to sole proprietorship of the South African earth.

As well as mapping out the living arrangements of the different groups and hinting at how much or how little each group belongs to the land, Gordimer is interested in revealing the communal values displayed by the groups. The De Beers, as representative rural Afrikaners, are shown to be strongly family-oriented. As Mehring thinks when De Beer addresses him as "You people" over the phone, "they cannot conceive of a man without a family of some sort" so they invent one for him (49). Since most of the opinions delivered on the De Beers

are focused through Mehring, it is no surprise to find them disparaging. For example, when De Beer comes over to Mehring's place, Mehring notices that "the whole family expects to go along." "Quite a delegation," Mehring observes as the hierarchy of the clan arranges itself before him. There is Old De Beer, "whose retaining wall of belly and bunch of balls part the thighs majestically" ("oh to wear your manhood, fatherhood like that, eh," thinks Mehring, enviously and not without irony); his son Hansie, "the one Mehring usually deals with but in his father's presence he ventures no opinions"; young Mrs. De Beer, a baby and an adolescent girl. During his exchange with De Beer, Mehring notices how structured the interactions are among family members, how powerful a patriarch De Beer is, and how the fact that it is a Sunday determines their behaviour. What is also pointed out by this exchange is Mehring's outsider status within the white ruling-class. As the narrator informs us, "their ¿the Afrikaners¿ insistence on talking to him in English demarcates the limits of his acceptance, out here, outside the city from which he comes and goes"(49).

Throughout the novel, Mehring's attitude toward women is turned to again and again to emphasize his chauvinistic attitude which manifests itself in part as an inability to see human beings as anything other than objects, functional. For instance, Mehring notices the cruel indifference with which Old De Beer regards his daughter-in-law, yet he reveals his

own brand of cruelty when he imagines what it must be like "to go into one of those women." "Vacant turnips," he thinks, "it must be like using the fleshy succulent plants men in the foreign legion have to resort to" (52). To the question why did he marry, he answers his son: "What's the reason we go after them ¿women¿ -- she was pretty. She had a smashing figure." To Antonia, he reveals his sexual fascism in admitting the "special pleasure" he feels in having paid for a woman. Mehring's desire for young women, girls actually, is not to be overlooked either: the adolescent daughter of a close family friend provokes his lust to the point where he finds himself asking her to a movie. Then there is his acutely rendered encounter with the teen-aged Portuguese girl on the airplane. His "extreme intimacy" with the girl, his fingers between her thighs, is also the extreme of detachment. "The girl had no name" and when he disengages himself from her body, he sees, and the simile is revealing, "a stranger's face as the face of a woman with whom one has lived so long one doesn't see it anymore . . ." (130).

As in the Afrikaner family, a significant structure of relationships exists in the Indian family. What distinguishes them mostly from the Boers, though, is the density of their population. Crowded into a small house alongside the store are generations: grandfather, father, mother, sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren. While there can be something suffocating about family, tradition and continuity (as is

evidenced in the feelings of the young Jalal), there can also be something quite soothing about the close, continuous relations among family members:

> At the same time Bismallah continued with his old father the long conversation of their lives together in the shop, its rhythm marked but never broken by the pauses of ordinary daily absences and returns and the gradual fall over the years, of the dominance of the old man's voice to the corresponding rise of Bismallah's as the one lapsed into the silence of old age and the other came into the loquacity of middle age. (120)

In contrast to the representatives of other groupings, Mehring is an island, devoid of family, continuity and community. His origins, as Wade points out, are as ambiguous as his birthplace which is, depending on one's politics, either South West Africa or Namibia. Of neither English nor Afrikaner ancestry, he can speak both languages. His surname is only similar to an Afrikaner one. Of his parents, we know nothing. A German couple, Kurt and Emmy, figured in his childhood, but his relation to them remains uncertain. He is long divorced from his ex-wife, finds it difficult to communicate with his son, and is estranged from his ex-lover, who is living in exile in England. His idea of conservation

without community seems sadly deficient. As does his notion of "historical destiny." In one of his many dialogues with Antonia, Mehring remembers her criticisms. She believes that Mehring's hold on the land is an illusory one, particularly because he fails to recognize the historical dimension embodied in it. He recalls her argument:

> That bit of paper you bought yourself from the deeds office isn't going to be valid for as long as another generation. It'll be worth about as much as those our grandfathers gave the blacks when they took the land from them. (177)

But Mehring <u>is</u> aware of the unreliability of his claim of possession. He wonders, in the first section of the novel, "how long can we go on getting away scot free?" Soon, he realizes, "in this generation or the next, it must be our turn to starve and suffer"(46-47).

But, it is implied, Mehring's broad awareness is not enough. It is vital that he think of himself in specific historical terms. It seems to be Gordimer's point that he has to realize that there is no easy way out of his social history, that it has to be faced and then lived through, responsibly and consciously. By dissociating himself from his time and place (he situates himself on a continuum with the aristocrats "caught up in the Terror" and the Jews of

Germany), Mehring is not going to make transcendence likely.

For the most crucial problem with Mehring, although Gordimer may not be explicit enough with this point to satisfy everyone, is that he resists addressing political ideas in any effective way, and this, perhaps, is what Boyers means when he says Mehring doesn't operate in terms of an ideology. He has imaginary debates with his opponents, Terry and Antonia, in which he reveals his own position as well as an understanding of theirs, but unfortunately these "debates" are one-sided; they take place in his head; their outcome is predictable:

> He has them up, arraigned, before him and they have no answer . . . . He feels inside himself the relief and overflow of having presented the unanswerable facts. (80)

It follows then that Mehring fails to acknowledge the public realm in his conscious mind. Yet its influence works on his subconscious: continually surfacing in his thoughts are fragments from it. The newspaper he is carrying when he falls asleep in the pasture, for example, is an uncomfortable reminder of the world outside throwing its troubling facts up to him: atrocities in Cambodia, no maize crop in the Transkei (47). But the phrase that recurs most persistently in Mehring's thoughts is the apocalyptic one: "soon there will be nothing left." It seems he believes there is nothing to be

done, that cyclical History will dispense the appropriate punishment at the appropriate time: "soon it will be our turn to starve and suffer." This is how he justifies his passive, psychological role over an active, historical one. In the face of the inevitable upheaval (as he understands it) comes Mehring's interest in conservation, his heightened awareness of the preciousness of nature and his desire for a rural sanctuary. But Gordimer's unspoken point is this: in South Africa, there can be no sanctuary. Politics is not just a climate one can seek shelter from if it is intemperate. In South Africa, politics is fate.

III

At the other end of the political spectrum from Mehring, Gordimer nevertheless treats the concerns of his side with understanding, even sympathy. She conveys not only her knowledge of how the other side thinks, but how it feels, and this she does without being explicitly judgemental. One of the ways in which Gordimer achieves this is by disclosing the weaknesses of Mehring's politics through his clashes, real or imagined, with others.

In true patriarchal fashion, the line of inheritance is traced from father to son. This is one of the ways in which power or powerlessness is insured, one of the ways, if you like, in which conservation is maintained. But, lines can be broken, and it is on this hope, among others, that the novel partially rests. Terry, Mehring's son, who, though shown to

be less than admirable in certain ways, is a liberal opposed to apartheid. Mehring, for whom "possessions are enough," wants to give his son everything he's had, for, he insists, "that's all there is." For Terry, however, there is more. He clearly doesn't want what his father has. He doesn't want to be a child of ill-gotten wealth and power. He wants to be born to community and continuity, not to isolation and control. In short, the son wants to disinherit the father and everything he represents. It is no surprise, then, that the grooves along which Mehring's mind habitually run are disturbed by Terry who collides with his father on nearly every issue raised between them.

Whereas Mehring doesn't question the fact of mandatory military service for adolescent males in his country, Terry writes in a letter to him: "I don't see anything good . . . anything to be gained by living for nine months as a cropped head with a bunch of loyal South Africans learning to be the master race just because you've got the guns"(76). Neither does Terry like being called 'Master' by blacks, a point of principle that his father, who can't imagine <u>not</u> adopting a position of superiority before blacks, writes off as whimsical. In an attempt at camaraderie, Mehring suggests to his son that they observe an African celebration going on near the farm. Predictably, Terry answers "No. It's a private thing. Nothing to do with us." And perhaps the final blow to the macho Mehring whose objectification of women is equal only

to his objectification of blacks, is his discovery of an anthology of homosexual literature in Terry's knapsack. But Mehring deflects even this blow. In one of his many monologues, he blames his ex-wife for their son's possible homosexuality. Since she enjoyed sodomy on occasion, it stands to reason that it would rub off on Terry.

Antonia, Mehring's ex-mistress, also figures predominantly in Mehring's thoughts. She is often linked with Terry for she too is a liberal, but one of those affected liberals for whom Gordimer stores up her disdain and that Mehring sees through. What often characterizes the debates between Mehring and Antonia is an anticipation of the other's argument. This is typical of political situations that are strongly polarized, with each side knowing the argument of the other side. For example, if Mehring were to ask Antonia "Why call it Namibia ¿South West Africa to Mehring¿? ", he can predict her answer:

> the Namib doesn't conjure up jealousy in anybody. So it doesn't suggest the country belongs anymore to Ovantos than Damaras, Hereroes than Baster . . . it's demographically neutral. A desert. It's nobody's in particular . . . . It'll be everybody's except the whites who occupied it unlawfully. (138)

Some of the qualities embodied by Terry and Antonia are worth admiring. They are whites who, to some extent, have

moved their perceptions off the grid, who refuse to remain locked in or to take for granted a system which denies a large majority of its population basic human freedoms, whites who are, in short, interested in a fair redistribution of power rather than in the conservation of it. Yet, true to her responsibility as a writer, Gordimer doesn't hesitate to point out the weaknesses in these two liberals. For all their disgust with Mehring's business acumen and what it represents, both Terry and Antonia use his wealth and power to serve their own ends. Terry, for instance, flies to New York to visit his mother on a ticket paid for by his father, and Antonia uses Mehring's connections to secure herself a lawyer in order that she get out of trouble, out of the country. It would seem, then, that both Terry and Antonia's kind of liberalism is deficient, for it is contained within the power of white capitalist society and is dependent on it. In citing these examples of collaboration, among others, Gordimer is making her case all the stronger.

While Mehring's sensitivity to the land, which was emphasized in the opening section of The Conservationist, is genuine, it also turns out to be limited and compromised. It has been the purpose of the remaining sections of the novel to imply that an ecological politics, a politics that concerns itself with preservation and nature, is simply not adequate for meeting the needs of Mehring's time and place. It is an escapist politics: Mehring uses his love of the land to

screen out the desperate problems of South Africa.

In an essay titled "The Screen and The Spike," John Berger describes the phenomenon of "screening" as a way of looking at the world that prevents seeing.[27] His term is an appropriate one to use in conjunction with Mehring, for it is clear that there is a screen that comes between him and reality, and that replaces reality. Through the sheer force of will, Mehring thinks the private sphere is his to shape and dominate, and that it can offer a refuge from the public realm. But the short-comings of such a way of perceiving are carefully exposed in the novel. The more Mehring resists the world outside of self, the more isolated and tortured he becomes. One of the messages of the novel seems to be that to exist in defiance of the public realm is not only to exist in indifference and in alienation, but is to ensure self-destruction.

As the screen isolates one from experience, it prolongs and makes absolute the state of "inexperience," the state, as Berger puts it, "of never accepting what is" (259). (This state, he cautions, is not to be confused with "innocence or naivete," but is often "accompanied by ruthlessness or sophistication"). This is precisely Mehring's problem. In possession of intelligence and imagination, he is,

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[27]John Berger, "The Screen and The Spike" in The Sense of Sight (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 253-60.

nevertheless, "persistently elsewhere"[28] and unable to accept "what is." Through her choice of Mehring's problematic private life as one of the novel's concerns, Gordimer is stressing the need, especially in a place like South Africa where the practice of screening is dangerously entrenched, to make the right kind of connections, to understand one's historical place, to be here instead of "persistently elsewhere."

But perhaps there is nowhere for Mehring to be but "elsewhere," given the historical shift registered in the novel. Perhaps Mehring's kind has to die, historically, in order that black history can resume. As the world of the white protagonist degenerates during the course of the novel so the black world regenerates. . . .

IV

The Conservationist is divided into unnumbered sections. The sections are often fragments and there are rarely transitions linking them. Such an arrangement reflects a measure of discontinuity, perhaps, but then, not all of the sections focus on one world. Some of the sections devote themselves to the "white" world, while others focus on the "black" world in its various aspects. This textual separation of white world from black mirrors to some extent the physical segregation of the worlds in South African reality, but in

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[28] Berger uses this phrase to characterize the state of an individual who chooses to place a screen between himself and reality.

treating them separately in her novel, Gordimer is not practicing a form of literary apartheid. That is, she is neither subjugating one world to the other nor is she suggesting that the two worlds don't mix and mingle. By including sections in her novel devoted to scenes from the black world and the white world, Gordimer is recognizing the difference, discursively and historically, between the two worlds. As she takes us into Mehring's world of perceptions in the opening pages of the novel, so in several sections she take us as far as she can into scenes of the black world to open it up to us.

Some are bound to object to the fact that it is a white woman, linked to the structures of colonial power, who is writing about the site of otherness. Still others may object to the fact that Gordimer has entered the black world only superficially, that it is the white protagonist's consciousness that she focuses most of her attention on. These kinds of objections are understandable in light of the context out of which Gordimer's fiction emerges. The issue of whether or not white writers can give voice to black characters is certainly a politically contentious one, especially in South Africa. Yet, I would nevertheless argue that a white writer's claim to speak for or imagine a black character comes from her ability to do so. And I would turn back to Gordimer's "The Essential Gesture" to suggest that the development of that ability is the writer's responsibility

"towards those with whom ¿she is¿ united" by "this extrapolation of suffering and resistance" (150). This is one of the ways in which a writer in South Africa can fulfill her "essential gesture," but, as Gordimer herself cautions, she can do this only in so far as she manages to preserve the integrity Chekhov demanded: "to describe a situation so truthfully that the reader can no longer evade it" (151).

It is clearly mapped out in the novel that in terms of living arrangements and economic power, blacks are in a singularly abysmal situation. Prevented by law from even the limited self-sufficiency and comfort experienced by the Indians, blacks seem doomed to rely on either the Indians or whites for shelter and employment. Various scenes from the black world are described in these sections and one of the most vividly rendered is that section devoted to "the location"(84-86). Near Mehring's farm, it is one of the areas designated for black habitation. One hundred and fifty thousand blacks are housed in this "endless" ghetto which serves as a vast pool of cheap labour for white urban employers. Blacks, we are reminded, cannot own property nor can they choose where they want to live. They are confined to locations or, in the case of farm labourers like Jacobus, forced to reside on the property of their bosses.

The farm workers and their families in <u>The Conservationist</u> live on the "compound" (a tin and wire structure primarily) which is next to the paddock. Mehring has no idea how many

people live in the structure. Jacobus, however, being the chief herdsman, has made his own arrangements off the compound; he and his family have taken over the domestic servant's quarters near the farmer's empty house. Alina, the servant, has fixed up the shed for herself and her man.

We have seen in the first section of the novel that Jacobus, when before his boss, can be the picture of deference, even sycophancy. In the first section of the novel dealing with the black world, however, we see something else. When he is among his own people, Jacobus is not above poking fun at Mehring. Neither is he above taking what he needs from his boss when his boss isn't there. He uses Mehring's tractor and pick-up when he likes, and we see him scooping cigarette butts out of Mehring's ashtray. After all, it is emphasized in the novel that Jacobus is the one on the farm who truly runs it; he works Saturday, Sunday, even Christmas. Thus, he affirms his belonging to it:

> I'm the one who oils and looks after the tractor. I'm the one who looks after all his machines, <u>all</u> his machines, everything, all his cattle, everyday. (80)

Even Mehring, if in a most patronizing way, attests to Jacobus's belonging. This is what he thinks to himself before leaving the farm to go back to the city one weekend:

> As usual, just as he is about to drive away Jacobus is seen hurrying over with an urgent request . . . . No matter how thoroughly the question of the farm's needs has been gone into, there will always be this compulsion of Jacobus to think of just one more thing, hardly more than a delaying tactic, as if he doesn't want to be left behind where he belongs, doesn't want to be left to it, the farm. (81)

Another thing Mehring admits, though he sees it as a bother, is the continuity of the blacks. For instance, he wants to pull down and decently rebuild the compound housing them on his farm, but he predicts

> there'll be dissatisfaction because they were here when he came, they were squatting God knows how long before he bought the place and they'll expect to have their grandchildren squatting long after he's gone. (202)

One might be led to ask who is doing the squatting here? By what authority is Mehring deemed rightful possessor of the land? How can he feel at home on it? The blacks take the land for granted (unlike Mehring who needs to go around asserting his "claims") because it has always been there and they have always been on it. They don't "own" the land, they

belong to it. And they manage to root themselves in it regardless of the battery of laws preventing them from feeling at home on it.

Although both the Indians and the blacks are oppressed by the whites, a fact that one might think would bind them in some significant way against a common enemy, their relations with each other aren't much more significant than they are with the whites. The Indians run a store at the turn-off of the farm road from which the farm workers buy their supplies. As arranged by Mehring, the black labourers get their weekly mealie rations from the Indian store. It is obvious that the Indians enjoy more economic power than the blacks; they have "blacks of their own" working for them and living off their bit of land. Next to their store is the Indians' house. It is surrounded by a ten-foot fence (built by blacks, we are told, to keep the blacks out) which takes in "the tin hovels supported by the yard wall down where their blacks lived" (35). The earth is not the only thing some think they can possess; it seems that the blacks can be appropriated as the "property" of whomever they're working for.

The relations between Indians and blacks are economically based; at least as they are displayed in this farm community. Blacks are the Indians' customers, the Indians supply what the blacks need. Thus, when Jacobus goes into the store, he does not talk to the Indians as he would to a white man, "nor as he would to one of his own people" (34). We are told that the

"challenging, aggressive way" in which the black man and the Indian storekeeper speak to each other is "a convention of the barriers between them" (34). The language in which they speak to each other is a form of pidgin Afrikaans, the language of trade.

Needless to say, the dependence of blacks on the Indians fuels the resentment of the doubly-oppressed black. It is not surprising to learn that the "Indias" intrusion on black land is the target of such resentment. For instance, it is in a moment of extreme frustration, with his hopes for a job and a Christmas package dashed, that Dorcas's husband can lash out at the Indians and wish them "all thrown out everywhere, all the Indias. No more taking our money. Kick them out. This is not Indias country" (125).

Michael Wade notes that the only instance of significant "unselfconscious communication between members of different groups" in the novel takes place between Jalal, Bismallah's son, and Izak, Jacobus's son (212-14). Jalal is painting the struts on a water tank and Izak chats with him about painting and offers practical suggestions on how the job might have been better done. However, when Jalal starts painting a peace sign on the tank, the connection between the two young men breaks down. Izak sees the sign merely as an egg; he is unable to understand its greater significance and is criticized by Jalal for his stupidity. Wade suggests that "the failure of this conceptualization between Jalal and Izak,

age-mates and members of oppressed groups," can be read as "a failure to transcend the fragmentation that characterizes group relationships in South Africa"(214).

There are plenty of examples of the unequal nature of the relations between blacks and whites in the novel, but perhaps the most telling is that "connection" Mehring desires but is flatly denied. He clearly wants to establish a more intimate friendship with Jacobus (Mehring is, after all, "no ordinary pig-iron dealer"), so much so that he imagines, in elaborate detail, spending New Year's Eve with him, drinking and talking, with Jacobus having the time of his life. But Mehring's desired encounter with Jacobus is abruptly shattered by this curtly-put statement: "Jacobus has not come"(209). The evening of camaraderie with Jacobus was a figment of Mehring's troubled imagination. Significantly, this fantasized connection immediately precedes the episode detailing the failed connection between Izak and Jalal. The notion that bridges can be built between members of different groups through personal relationships is soundly deflated by these episodes and thus in the novel as a whole.

Despite the host of circumstances encouraging their fragmentation, blacks are seen in the novel as remaining bound to each other. For example, when a farm labourer is laid off, Jacobus tries to secure him a job at an abbattoir where they aren't interested in the matter of a worker's papers (farm labourers don't have the necessary permits to secure

themselves city jobs). The job doesn't come through, but the unemployed labourer and his family are housed in the already crowded compound and are fed from the communal mealie pot. As well, those living in the compound, at great risk to themselves, harbour Witbooi, another migrant labourer without a job and the proper papers.

While blacks are revealed as belonging to the land rather than possessing it, and their sense of community displayed as more substantial than Mehring's, there is, as Michael Thorpe asserts, no "simplistic assumption of black virtue" in The Conservationist.[29] By focusing on the "ancestor motif" running throughout the novel, Thorpe suggests that Gordimer reveals the blacks initially as practicing among themselves a kind of "terrified apartheid." Before they can become the true inheritors of South Africa, he concludes, they have to "renew old sanctities and feel and act as one people."

The most obvious way in which the divisiveness among blacks is revealed is in their response to the black corpse on the farm. Neither Mehring nor Jacobus will claim the body. "Is not our trouble," says Jacobus to the queries of the Indian shopkeeper. But in denying responsibility for the corpse, Jacobus is, as Thorpe points out, cutting off ties with his kin and is thus perpetuating the divisiveness begun

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[29]Michael Thorpe, "The Motif of the Ancestor in The Conservationist" in Research in African Literatures, Vol.14, No.2, Summer 1983, 184-192. Thorpe traces the motif as it is revealed in the quotations punctuating Gordimer's novel from Callaway's book, The Religious System of the Amazulu.

by whites. The names of most of the blacks in the novel--Izak, Thomas, Solomon and Jacobus -- attest to the fact that they and their ancestors have come under the influence of Christianity, the white man's religion. The quotations punctuating the novel are from a white reverend's book that deals with another religious system: the ancestral rites of the Amazulu. This system, at least in the quotations we read, speaks of a world removed from present history and connected instead to nature and mythology.[30] While it is dangerous, as Rich cautions, to over-interpret the importance of these quotations, they do seem to imply the need for blacks to recover old traditions, connect up with their own history, and re-affirm themselves, as Thorpe pointed out, as "one people."[31]

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[30]Paul Rich makes the important point that this "mythological anchoring" should not be taken too far. For, as he cautions, in resorting to "an archaic and pre-industrial basis for African values," there is "the danger of reinstating the same cultural fabrication that was endemic to the colonial tradition." He sees Gordimer's use of the Zulu narrative as but "one part of a wide political process of self-identification on which the novel does not seek to elaborate . . ." ("Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction, 63-64).

[31]The use of Zulu mythology in the novel has also been treated by Judie Newman and Stephen Clingman. Newman speaks of the quotations from Callaway as organizing a subtext which slowly comes to the foreground. She also points out the feminine basis behind much of this mythology and shows how it contrasts with the sexual fascism of Mehring's world. We shall see, for example, that it is the wife of one of the farm workers who is possessed by a spirit and shapes, to some extent, the life of the surrounding African society. See Newman's article, "Gordimer's The Conservationist: 'That Book of Unknown Signs'" in Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, Vol. XXII, No. 3, 1981. See also Clingman's chapter on the novel in which he points out the ironical relationship between

In order to explore these implications, it will be useful to look closely at two sections in the novel -- that section dealing with Phineas's wife, Solomon and the sacrifice (164-173), and the last section of the novel which centers on the second burial of the corpse by the blacks (266-267).

Solomon, one of the farm labourers who lives on the compound, gets beaten up one night by thugs from the shantytown. The shantytown is behind the De Beer's farm and seems to be a place associated with crime, danger and evil. It is the place, Jacobus believes, from which the killers of the man in the pasture came. The morning after the beating, Jacobus finds Solomon lying unconscious in the third pasture. This is the same pasture in which Solomon earlier discovered the corpse, a circumstance that serves to enforce the eerie identification Solomon is to feel with the body.

After Solomon's "resurrection" (he had to be taken to the hospital to be revived), Phineas's wife, considered by many in the compound to be a crazy woman, is bothered by dreams of wild animals. Earlier in the novel, we were told of her strange powers and her desire to be a witch-doctor, but in

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the extracts and the central narrative. At first, "this is an irony in which the central narrative dominates." As the novel progresses, Clingman indicates that the sub-text comes to "prophesy or control" the direction of the main text. Clingman makes clear the analogy between the body buried beneath the surface of Mehring's farm controlling his destiny and the sub-text of Zulu myth controlling "the surface narrative of Mehring's stream of consciousness" and "the text as a whole." Clingman also makes the interesting point that Callaway's own text has been used ironically "to foretell the demise of its own partial legacy of cultural supremacy."

this section, we find that her dreams have become so bothersome that she must gather people together to witness her attempts at exorcism. While Phineas's wife has faith in a more remote religious system, it is clear from the description of her ceremony of expurgation that those attending it are faithless and that the ceremony itself is a forced exercise.

People are "crowded into a room" to listen to her, a room that "there was no getting out of." She must dictate the time that is to be clapped and the phrase that is to be chanted. Somebody "had" to beat a drum. The participants feel "awkward." Their elbows are cramped by the congestion of bodies in the room, making it difficult to clap. Worst of all, the participants are sober; Phineas's wife does not provide beer at her gatherings. Her chanting clashes with a radio blaring outside, and at one point, her prayers are lost to an advertising jingle that the children "know by heart." While Phineas's wife exhausts herself physically and emotionally in her ritual, we are informed that people in the crowd got "restless and began to shift and talk" or else simply wandered out of the room. After the gathering, Solomon immediately observes what is perhaps an appropriately prosaic finale to a ceremony lacking in spirit and spontaneity: he sees Phineas's wife "washing her hands in a tin basin in the yard like a woman who has just finished plucking a fowl or some other ordinary work" (166).

Since his beating, Solomon has had dreams about a young

bull. He does not speak to Phineas's wife about his dreams, but he knows that she said if she had dreamed of cattle instead of wild animals, she would know what to do. She would kill a beast and make herself well again.

Solomon decides to make himself well again. Since he has been dreaming of a bull, he knows he must order a sacrifice to cleanse himself. But, of course, none of them own any cattle that they can slaughter; things have changed since their ancestors' time. Whereas their ancestors were truly herdsman and could pick a beast from their herd to slaughter, Solomon has to settle for a goat with a white face bought from a man on the location, another hint that this sacrifice is going to be a less than reverent one. The first hint comes in the opening sentence of the section, a sentence that is isolated from the body of the section by several spaces to accentuate it. It reads: "There was not enough meat on the goat; most who came got only beer" (164). Before we get a description of the ceremony, then, we learn that the calling-card for most of its attendants will be the promise of meat to eat.

People gather from all around to participate in the event just as all kinds of people had a hand in arranging it. Unfortunately, there is a lack of consensus as to the purpose of the gathering. Phineas's wife, for example, brings "her own people" who act, much to the chagrin of Solomon, as if it were her goat and the sacrifice for her. These people bring beer, however, which is duly appreciated.

The climax of the ritual, the killing of the goat, is undertaken in a sloppy, amateurish fashion. The scrawny animal is let out of the barn it has been locked in for several days and runs toward some old cabbage leaves. It defecates and is then promptly thrown on its side by "many hands" before being stabbed over the aorta. The goat does not die quickly or quietly. A man who knows about "these things" ("these things" being, presumably, the ritual invocations in such ceremonies) is a friend of Solomon's brother "who works for a bus company" in the city. He recites a speech, "conversationally to the air," to Solomon's parents, to which no one listens.

Instead, people hover over the dying goat, eager to be fed. Much argument and energy is devoted to the butchering and dividing up of the meat. And "as an afterthought," someone remembers what must be an important element of the ritual -- that the blood of the animal must be drained and put in a bowl to sit overnight in Solomon's room. Drinking gets underway and the "ceremony" becomes a wild party that is to span the weekend.

While this particular ceremony has been revealed to be lacking in the right kind of faith and attention, what is nevertheless included at the end of the section describing it is a passage that quietly and movingly describes the solidarity which has emerged in this coming-together of blacks. Despite the debased nature of the ceremony, the

gathering itself has temporarily freed them from the oppression and squalor of their day-to-day lives:

> There was no one to come up complaining to their rooms built of reject breeze-blocks, their lean-tos of tin and sacking, their fowl-runs made of scrap and filched fencing that jagged up and down, appeared and disappeared in light of their braziers blotted out and released by the movement of their bodies . . . . All the farm was dark except for where they gathered the life of the place together for themselves . . . . The sleeping cattle, the barn, the sheds, the fanged and clawed machines the colour of football jerseys and smelling of oil, the pick-up and the caterpillar tractor, the water obediently flowing forever down there in the reeds -all -all might have been theirs. (172)

It is in the second burial of the corpse (remember that it was first indifferently dumped in the pasture by the white policemen) that the blacks pay the proper attention to their ancestry and origins, thus proving their worth, suggests Thorpe, as the inheritors of South Africa. Like the goat sacrifice, the burial is a communal event but one that is undertaken in a more dignified and serious manner.

Witbooi offers to make the coffin and Izak saws the planks

for it. Alina brings them tea and porridge and converses with them, but, significantly, does not talk loudly "because of what it was the two were hammering together"(266). Jacobus had phoned Mehring for money for the wood, and Mehring instructed him and Alina to pick it up from the Indians' store. The Indians, sorry that the blacks have no money for a wrapping-cloth, give Alina some cotton that wasn't a good seller.

This funeral takes place on "high, firm" ground. Solomon and his brother have dug the grave. Jacobus drives the tractor slowly to the grave site; the coffin is on a haywagon hitched to the tractor. He drives slowly to allow the mourners to follow at their pace. There are mourners already gathered at the site. Thomas, the nightwatchman, has missed his afternoon sleep to pay his respects. Some children are there along with some old men and women from the location who had weeded the farm. Phineas's wife, free of her demons, is with her husband and a few members of a Zion sect, one man with a drum and another with a staff, are also at the grave. The drum is struck "softly" once or twice, in sharp contrast to the feverish, constant drumming that characterized that other ceremony, and is followed by a moment of "absolute silence." The man with the staff then begins to pray out loud and the women of his sect begin to sing a hymn. Thomas's "thin" voice joins them in "perfect harmony." The children's eyes follow the spade wielded by Phineas. Witbooi, Izak,

Jacobus and Solomon sink "the decent wooden box" into the earth and Phineas covers it. Of his own accord, Witbooi has provided a mound of white stones with which to mark the grave.

There is nothing debased about this ritual, nothing forced or excessive about it. And the manner in which it is conveyed attests to its integrity. It no longer matters that this man had no name, no ancestors, no family. Jacobus and his people bury him. In doing so, they accept him as "one of them." In doing so, they reclaim the land:

> The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of the earth, theirs; one of them. (267)

Several critics have observed, taking a cue from Gordimer, (who, in a remark on The Conservationist, mentioned that the "answer" to her novel could be found in the last paragraph)[32], that the phrase in the second last line, "he had come back," is "a direct paraphrase of the great rallying cry of the African National Congress in the fifties: 'Afrika! Mayebuye!' - 'Africa! May it come back!'" (Clingman article, 190). With this in mind, it becomes clear that the novel ends, as Stephen

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[32]Johannesburg Sunday Times, November 10, 1974.

Clingman puts it, with a powerful vision of "historical transfer." The Conservationist can be seen to be situated at the point where white history ends and black history resumes--a persuasive indication of Gordimer's "Africa-centred consciousness."[33]

The identification between Mehring and the corpse in the last paragraph of the novel is close enough to cause some readers to mistake Mehring for the one being buried.[34] But the fact is, Mehring is not part of the ceremony at all. The first paragraph of the last section of the novel tells us through Jacobus that Mehring "was leaving that day for one of those countries white people go to, the whole world is

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[33]It is also a persuasive indication that "black," as John Cooke points out, is not a "secret" text that can't be decoded. That, in fact, in Gordimer's later fiction (beginning with The Conservationist), "black" is an answer. See Cooke's The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 41-2.

[34]The relationship between Mehring and the corpse on the farm has been discussed by many critics, but is worth looking at briefly here. Mehring's genuine interest in conservation, which is tied to his desire for a pastoral solution as a way to live in South Africa, is undermined by the existence of the dead man on his property. While at first the body was a sight that had "no claim" on him, it begins to make claims of its own and its presence on the farm becomes a very real one. For instance, when Mehring passes out in the field with his face to the earth, he awakens startled, thinking the situations he finds himself in "strongly familiar." Of course, this was the position of the dead man in the pasture, his face down in the muddy earth. When Mehring sinks into a mudhole on one of his walks over the farm, he feels as if "a soft cold black hand" were clutching his ankle. And after the flood (brought on from the storm in Mozambique) returns the dead man to the surface, Mehring has to acknowledge his worst fears: "The only thing that is final is that he's always there." He cannot repress the black man out of existence.

theirs"(266). Perhaps the only way for him to cope with the bewildering demands of the metaphor "politics is fate" is to leave South Africa. Perhaps this is the choice Mehring makes at the end of The Conservationist. He leaves the country in the realization that there is no place for him in it. This is a choice that Rosa Burger, the protagonist of Gordimer's next novel, Burger's Daughter, makes, but it is a choice she finds she cannot live with. Unlike Mehring, she returns to South Africa, in acknowledgement of and in response to the requirements of her place.

Burger's Daughter: Securing A "Place"

The Conservationist ended with blacks linking up with their history and the white protagonist out of history. In ending her novel this way, Gordimer affirmed her commitment to the primacy of African history and pronounced as dead the kind of consciousness manifested by Mehring. In her next novel, Burger's Daughter, published five years after The Conservationist, she also acknowledges the world of black consciousness, a world that erupts in violent revolt at the novel's end.[1] The Soweto uprising of 1976 is one of the historical events to which this novel is in large part a response.[2] The white world Gordimer focuses on in Burger's Daughter is what Rowland Smith calls the world "beyond the liberal pale."[3] Partly through the figure of Lionel Burger

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[1]Nadine Gordimer, Burger's Daughter. First published in Great Britain by Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1979; reprinted Harmondsworth, 1980. The Harmondsworth edition is cited herein.

[2]See M.J. Daymond, "Burger's Daughter: A Novel's Reliance on History" in Momentum: On Recent Southern African Writing. Eds. Daymond, Jacob and Lenta. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), 159-70. The other event is the Sharpeville riots of 1960.

[3]Rowland Smith, "Living for the Future: Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter" in World Literature Written in English, Vol.19-20 (1980-81), p.164. The historical situation of South Africa in the years between The Conservationist and Burger's Daughter didn't unfold as hoped. Where The Conservationist ended with the suggestion that black history was moving into an ascendant role, Burger's Daughter deals with the fact that five years later, this is an ideal not yet realized. However, the novel ends on a pre-revolutionary note because of the Soweto uprising. The world beyond the liberal pale is the world of white radicals, and Burger's Daughter deals to a

(who bears a strong resemblance to Abram Fischer, an actual Communist activist)[4], Gordimer traces the history (from the twenties to the late sixties) of a white revolutionary in South Africa. As well, Gordimer faces the configurations of the present; in particular, the separatist politics of the new generation of blacks and the problem faced by radical whites of how to "fit in" to the new historical context. The story's real centre, however, is not Lionel Burger, but, as the title indicates, Lionel's daughter, Rosa.

In many ways, Rosa Burger is Mehring's opposite. Where he eluded the public realm, she is immersed in it, her connection to her country's history enforced by the fact that she was born in May of 1948, the very month the first Afrikaner nationalist government took office. And where Mehring was alienated from his descendants and ancestors, Rosa is almost too bound by hers. Child of militant political activists, she is raised in an atmosphere of trials, prison visits, meetings, secrecy and personal sacrifice: the political, we see, is ordinary to her. But unlike others of her generation and situation, she does not accept her heritage unquestioningly. She is made to realize the need to claim a private life of her own, and to discover a commitment that is hers with which she can meet the new demands of her particular place and time.

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large extent with their plight in present day South Africa.

[4]For a poignant essay on Bram Fischer, read Mary Benson's "A True Afrikaner" in Granta 19 (Fall 1986), 198-223.

With her customary skill and insight, Gordimer traces Rosa's emergence into a new type of committed individual in Burger's Daughter.

The idea of Burger's Daughter -- of what it would be like to be a child of white Communist parents in South Africa--had fascinated Gordimer for a long time. She had, she admits in an interview,

> wanted somebody to write a novel of that nature for years, someone directly from the centre of the milieu. However when the right people did write they wrote non-fiction books and never attempted novels.[5]

In the end, Gordimer decided "to be presumptuous" and go ahead and write the novel. It is the only novel of hers, she claims in the same interview, that has a purpose outside simply writing it; it is "a kind of homage to that group of early communists"(17).

Gordimer was intrigued in her own life to see how, in her generation, children departed from their parents' political beliefs (or lack of them) and completely changed their attitude. On the other hand, the children of the Communists did not. As Gordimer explains in a Kunapipi interview,

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[5]From "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer" in Salmagundi, no.62 (Winter 1984), p.17.

they simply took up the torch. It was a relay race of generations, so to speak, and they did not seem to question the way of life that these political beliefs dictated. It wasn't just simply a matter of saying I think this or think that, and voting, and going to a political meeting. It was putting your whole life on the line. Your political beliefs as a Communist completely dominated your whole way of life in a country like this, even before the Communist Party was banned . . . .[6]

The startling thing for Gordimer was to imagine how this intensely disciplined, demanding and life-threatening family tradition affected young lives. At the series of political trials that went on after the banning of the Communist Party in South Africa in 1950, she would see these children, quite often left with the responsibility of the whole household while one or both parents were imprisoned.[7] From these

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[6]Susan Gardner, "A Story for This Place and Time: An Interview with Nadine Gordimer about Burger's Daughter" in Kunapipi III (Fall 1981), p.100.

[7]A recently released film directed by Chris Menges and titled "A World Apart" conveys a similar situation. It is based on the experiences of the young Shawn Slovo (who wrote the script), daughter of Joe Slovo, commander-in-chief of the ANC (and the only white member of its executive), who lives and works in Zambia, and of Ruth First, a journalist and former member of the ANC, who was killed by a letter bomb in Maputo in 1982. It forcefully captures the private anguish that is often the result of a fierce political commitment.

experiences, the character of Rosa Burger gradually began to take shape.

Burger's Daughter is divided into three sections, with Rosa addressing a different person in each section, the person through whom at that moment she can best perceive and understand herself. Each section is distinguished by a change in epigraph, and by the fact that each is narrated from a different point in time. The people whom Rosa chooses to confide in -- Conrad, her bourgeois boyfriend; Katya, her father's first wife; and Lionel, her father -- are absent. So, like Mehring, she engages in monologues. But where Mehring's monologues were an inflexible kind of self-communing, Rosa's are characterized by a fierce willingness to understand herself. Since the narrative is a process by which the protagonist's history unfolds within the context of her country's history, it is practical to discuss the novel section by section, focusing on some of the main concerns that arise in each. Before doing so, it will be necessary to delineate another form of commitment practiced by Gordimer and manifested in this novel.

Outside her fiction, Gordimer has voiced her belief in the writer's responsibility both to society and to art. In an ambivalent review of a fellow South African's (J.M. Coetzee's) novel, Life and Times of Michael K, Gordimer reveals yet

another kind of commitment.[8] In Coetzee's novel, she maintains that "the organicism that Lukács defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny is distorted more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer"(6). Clearly it is Lukács's theory of critical realism she is appealing to here, the mode she favours for political expression.

For Lukács, "great realism" must make clear the organic connection between people as private individuals and people as members of a community.[9] Measured this way, literature determined either by "pure introspection" or "a naturalistic levelling-down" would be distorting (8). The aim of the critical realist, on the other hand, is to reveal that "everything is politics":

> every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with the struggles of the community, i.e., with politics; whether the humans themselves are conscious of this, unconscious of it or even trying to escape from it, objectively their actions, thoughts and emotions nevertheless spring

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[8]Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening" in The New York Review of Books (February 2, 1984), 3-6. In The Black Interpreters, Gordimer also reveals Lukács's influence on her when she maintains that the best African writers in English are "critical realists."

[9]Georg Lukács, Preface to Studies in European Realism (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964).

from and run into politics. (9)

Thus, the tension and much of the irony in The Conservationist derived from the battle between Mehring's inability to come to terms with himself and the circumstances which he inherited, and the power of those circumstances to determine his character and his fate. Part of Gordimer's project in the novel was to reveal, despite Mehring's reluctance to recognize it, the persuasiveness of Lukács's credo.

The central criterion of Lukáscian realism is "the type": "a peculiar synthesis which binds together the general and the particular both in characters and in situations"(6). It is not its average quality that makes it a type, but the fact that in it

> all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentations of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs. (6)

So, in The Conservationist again, Gordimer presented us in the figure of her protagonist with a certain "type," a type that some critics have identified as a "representative white South African." But Gordimer, as if in acknowledgment of Lukacs's

recommendations, is much more particular in her characterization than that. Mehring is not from South Africa, but from Namibia, a country which is illegally occupied by South Africa. He is a wealthy white capitalist who deals in pig-iron. Because of his business concerns he travels widely and has substantial international contacts, particularly with the Japanese.[10] The fact that he has an affair with a left-winger is but one example of his pluralism. As well, he is revealed to have an interest in "conservation" and clearly wants a connection with the land. However, while the latter were seen to be potentially good qualities, Gordimer pointed out the limits of such qualities, given Mehring's kind and situation. In Burger's Daughter, she will continue with the process of "typing" in the Lukácscian sense to illuminate the political climate outlined in that novel and the different responses to it.

Two more characteristics of "great realism" are identified by Lukács: one, that the writer take as her starting point the problems of community in order that she identify "humanly and artistically with some popular movement"(12); two, that she "ruthlessly scrutinize" her own world picture(11).

Clearly Gordimer identifies as a citizen and as an artist with "some popular movement" -- the struggle against

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[10]It is probably for just these "business" reasons that the Japanese were made "honourary whites" in South Africa.

apartheid[11] -- and at the same time is critical of her own world picture: the weaknesses as well as the strengths of characters who represent her side in the struggle are uncovered in her novels. But it is her dogged insistence on the interconnectedness of the private and public spheres that ranks Gordimer among the great realists. For unlike some political novelists who welcome the idea that "everything is politics," even to the point where the private life becomes defunct or irrelevant, Gordimer understands that the private life and its virtues count, but that they must exist in an enriching relationship with the public life if they are to achieve full significance. This is the lesson Mehring was to have learned in The Conservationist. The obverse lesson, equally important, is the central question of Burger's Daughter, and that is: what is the meaning of any kind of commitment if there is no self to commit? Gordimer is as interested in individuals and their relationships as she is in the society that surrounds them, and it is for this reason that Robert Boyers hails Burger's Daughter as one of the finest political novels. Gordimer has, writes Boyers,

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[11]That she is radically opposed to apartheid is about the only doctrine to which Gordimer admits she subscribes. She resists the notion that she is a "South African" novelist, and places herself firmly in an African tradition. See The Black Interpreters. As well, she denies affliation with any religious or political orthodoxy and disputes the contention that much of her recent fiction is specifically feminist in nature. Gordimer's reluctance to think of herself as a feminist will be explained later.

> reconceived the very idea of private experience and created a form that can accommodate mircroscopic details of individual behaviour and sentiment without suggesting for a moment that individuals are cut off from the collective consciousness and political situations characteristic of their societies.[12]

Through the figure of Rosa Burger, Gordimer has done what Orwell in "Inside the Whale" thought impossible. She has insisted that political awareness and personal fulfilment do not have to be contradictory states. The following discussion of Burger's Daughter will explore how such an integration is achieved.

The epigraph to the first part of Burger's Daughter is from Claude Levi-Strauss; it reads "I am the place in which something has occurred" and serves as a fitting departure for a section that deals with the importance, influence and finally the tyranny of "place" on Rosa Burger. The idea of "place" is central to this novel, for a "place" is where one can belong and feel secure. Having a "place" defines a person and gives her a position in social space. Without a "place," it follows, an individual is nowhere. The idea becomes an especially complicated one for Rosa for she is not

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[12]Robert Boyers, Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 63.

only in the place in which something has occurred but she is in the place in which something is occurring: in her country, the struggle between two social orders is ongoing. The problem Rosa faces is the problem Gordimer as a writer faces, and that is, how to put oneself into a meaningful relationship (as a citizen or as an artist) with a social order that is not yet realized. This is a dilemma that probably plagues many whites opposed to the regime, but it is particularly complicated in Rosa's case because of her inherited circumstances. One of the central questions of the novel has to do with finding a viable "place" to be, politically, in a country where there seem to be only two choices -- the extremes of either Right or Left. One of the difficulties of the historical situation in which Rosa finds herself is that there is no effective, uncompromised, moderate position to inhabit. But neither can she feel secure in the radical position as it was occupied by her parents.

Levi-Strauss's structuralism seems to leave little "place" for the individual, as does the society Gordimer reveals, with its surveillance techniques. The idea of a private life for anyone becomes problematic in a country whose legislative practices seem bent on impinging on every aspect of individual privacy. Thus, what Rosa discovers at the end of the first section of the novel is that there is no "place" for her in her father's country. She does not know how to act or feel at home in it, thus she makes that other choice: she leaves it.

She insists, as Gordimer does, on the importance of acquiring a private life.

Part of Gordimer's technique in Burger's Daughter is to equate certain character "types" with places, thereby suggesting how powerful an influence one's place is on one's character. One of the results of this technique is that people are often for Rosa the "places" in which something has occurred. Thus, particularly in the opening section of the novel, Rosa moves to and from people and their places in an attempt to define and situate herself in relation to them.

There can be something schematic about the array of types presented in this section, yet in a political situation as polarized as South Africa's, it is easy to understand discernible types emerging. Neither then should Rosa's propensity to "type" people be surprising, given her background. Her "habit of sorting into objectively correct and false assumptions the position taken" is, she admits, "the sane habit" of her kind (328). And since she is in the process of re-defining her own political consciousness, it is opportune that she assess people according to theirs. Her knowledge of the arguments of the different sides in the struggle makes for her efficient if cool categorizations of people. Yet, despite their occasionally mechanistic quality, these categorizations fufill a vital didactic function in familiarizing readers with the complexities of, and the various responses to, South African society across a range of

historical configurations.

The person Rosa is addressing in the first section of the novel, Conrad "Something-or-Other," is a petty-bourgeois drifter and one of those persons who becomes for Rosa a "place" in which something occurs. Conrad is the first of many types Rosa is to meet and is introduced as such: "he was not the type looking for commitment" (17). Lacking in political commitment, but certainly not in skepticism and curiosity, Conrad befriends Rosa at her father's trial. After Lionel dies in prison (he was sentenced to life imprisonment, shortly after which he died), Rosa takes up Conrad's earlier offer of a place to stay primarily because she feels he will make no demands on her.

Conrad's "place" is described, significantly, as "nowhere." This description of his habitat implies something about him, for, in a sense, he too is nowhere. He lacks a firm position in the human world: he is without a job, responsibility, and is socially, emotionally as well as politically uncommitted. He is also physically unappealing--thin, pale, with a droopy mustache -- and we may wonder where the attraction lies for Rosa. Perhaps it is because he is so different from her, living the individual life she's never tried, that she gravitates toward him. Whatever the case, for the first time in her life, in his cottage, she admits she begins to feel free.

Conrad's fascination, on the other hand, seems to centre

on the details he imagines of life in "that house," the Burger residence, in which he accuses Rosa of growing up through other people and without a choice. Marx and Lenin, he concludes, were all "taken in with the breakfast cornflakes." Because they were part of the air she breathed, he surmises, she must have accepted them as perfectly natural. For this militant individualist (who, when he feels, asserts there is "no 'we,' only 'I'"), it is boggling to consider that the occasions someone like Rosa was taught were the "real ones" were not the private adolescent kicks like his desire to "fuck" his mother, but were when blacks were shot by police, when people were detained, when leaders went to jail. The difference between him and Rosa is made clear by their contrasting memories of Sharpeville. Where Sharpeville was a very real event for Rosa at age twelve (she remembers black men being shot in the back and wondering why that would be any different from being shot in the chest), politics didn't exist for Conrad at that age. He was too wrapped up in what were for him the "true realities": sex and death.

Conrad makes many formulations about life in "that house" during the course of his time spent with Rosa, and Rosa tends to remain passive before him. She can only talk back when she knows he is not there, at which point she reconstructs his arguments, thinks them through, and offers her own opinions. In doing so, she reveals her scorn for Conrad's lack of political consciousness and what she describes as his "navel-

fluff-picking hunt for 'individual destiny'." For all his attempts at interpreting and arranging her life, he has failed to grasp what truly motivated her. Everything she did was not due to the claims of the Communist Party as he assumed, but to the greater claims of "blood, shared genes, the semen from which ¿she¿ had issued and the body in which ¿she¿ had grown"(62). The fact that she is her "father's daughter" is the fact that has determined all her personal activities, her "great wild times." This is the "monstrous" claim she recognizes and fights against in Conrad's cottage. Yet, she leaves the very "place" where this kind of "fervid private tantrum" was possible because she understands that the self-engrossment she and Conrad were engaged in -- "accepting each other's encroachments as the law of the litter, treating each other's dirt as our own" -- was incestuous and a dead-end, lacking as it was in "adult accountability."

The encounter with Conrad has been important because while warning Rosa of the limits and dangers of Conrad's kind of self-indulgence, it has also persuaded her of the need to search for a private life. It has prompted her to re-consider the people and places of her past to discover how they have shaped her and to see if she can find a place for herself among them.

She understands that life in the Burger house was not normal by most standards. People were always coming and going, or staying, stretching the limits of the typical family

unit. She was raised, for instance, with a black boy, Baasie, whose father was a revolutionary in exile. She had few "exclusive rights" with her parents: "we belonged to other people," she admits. Her parents were as consciously political as Conrad was apolitical, both of them committed Communists and tireless workers for the cause of black liberation. There seemed to be no split in her parents between private and public virtues. Just as Lionel's concern for the human body (he was a doctor) was extended to the body politic, so the domestic values of the Burger household, love and care to all, were exercised outside the home. Real revolutionaries, Lionel and Kathy Burger were regularly detained or imprisoned. When this happened, Rosa and her brother, but not Baasie, would be shipped off to another "place," the farm of Burger's sister and brother-in-law.

Velma and Coen Nel are, in Gordimer's typology, rural Afrikaners who reveal that fierce allegiance to family demonstrated by the De Beers in The Conservationist. The Nels stick by Lionel out of "blood loyalty" rather than out of any sense of shared political conviction, for in terms of Afrikaner ideology, Lionel is clearly a traitor. They represent for Rosa a different kind of family from the Burger's, a family defined by white skin whose politics are based on preserving the dominance of their replica of the human family. Rosa is quick to understand why Baasie was not allowed here: he was the wrong colour. In this "place," she

observes, those who owed love and care to one another could be identified by a simple rule of family resemblance.

Despite its racialism, this way of life makes a claim on Rosamarie Burger, named as she is not only for Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary, but for her grandmother, Marie Burger, out of respect for family, despite the order they represent of conservation, possession, privilege and blood loyalty. But no matter how natural and appealing seems the order of life that "surrounded, coated, swaddled [the child] Rosa; the order of Saturday; the order of family hierarchy; the order of black people out in the street and white people in the shade of the hotel stoep," it is an order founded on an indifference to other people's suffering and an order she resists.

Another order of life Rosa is confronted by but resists is that of her father's closest associates, committed Communists like Dick and Ivy Terblanche whoms she calls "the faithful":

> They were not many. They had been to prison and come out again, lived through two, three, five years of their sentences . . . . They lived through years-long bans on their movements and association with other people and often were banned again the week restrictions expired. (96)

Despite tremendous personal suffering and political failure, "the faithful" are committed to the "Future." The past

doesn't count; the "relic present" doesn't count. As Rosa dryly notes, "they've lived without fulfilment of personal ambition and it's not peace of mind they're looking forward to in old age" (112). They have denied themselves careers, holidays, friends, and a private life to work towards the revolution. Against all odds, and this is the fact that both amazes and repels Rosa, their faith remains firm. But there is nothing she can hold on to here. She is driven to ask questions that reveal her belief in the futility of their beliefs. What good is all this faith? What have they got to show for it? She runs from the earnest optimism of Dick and Ivy because it oppresses her. For she knows they are not only waiting for "the Future," but for her -- to find a course of action to follow, something to do, since she is, after all, Burger's daughter.

Clare, age-mate of Rosa's, is the faithful daughter of Dick and Ivy Terblanche. She has inherited her parents' political convictions not out of a personal sense of the rightness of them but rather "like a disease." To Rosa, Clare is a conformist, the kind of revolutionary who simply picks up the torch without reflection or realization. Yet, when Rosa accuses Clare of conformity, Clare's retort, what other choice is there?, is convincing. Her answer to the question of individual commitment lies in taking some action, in attempting to do some good whereas Rosa has no answer, no

notion of how to act.[13] Clare is the "type" Rosa could easily have been and this is perhaps why her childhood friend is the object of so much of Rosa's scorn. "I watch her," Rosa says, "as if she were myself."

As much as for her "contracted" politics, for instance, Clare is criticized by Rosa for her physical deficiencies:

> She's something sad rather than ugly, a woman without sexual pride -- as a female she has no vision of herself to divert others from her physical defects. The way she stood -- it irritated me. . . . The dandruff and eczema it caused, they were of nervous origin. Why did we pretend not to notice this affliction? It was 'unimportant.' She knew I was seeing her clumsy stance, the tormenting patches of inflamed and shedding skin, stripped of familiar context. Poor thing; and she knew I thought: poor

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[13]Clare's rationale for her kind of commitment-what other choice is there?-is similar to that of some of the thirties writers whom Orwell took to task in "Inside the Whale." In a situation where lines can be clearly drawn between good and evil, (such as the situation of Europe in the thirties with the very real threat of fascism), it makes sense to take a stand which opposes the enemy. In the case of the writers of the thirties, many of them decided that to be a member of the Communist Party was one of the clearest ways to fight Fascism. So it seems to Clare Terblanche in South Africa. There is no other choice but to be a radical. While this is an effective stance to a large extent, what Orwell and Gordimer both seem to be objecting to is the lack of personal conviction involved in these kinds of commitments. Their point seems to be that the politics worth having require one to delve deeper into oneself.

thing. (123-24)

If Clare's afflictions weren't noticed before, they are noticed now. Without the prop of her parents' ethos, Rosa sees Clare as an "empty vessel," her flesh is "dumb" and her private life, a shameful burden. The implication of these kinds of criticisms seems to be that had Clare more awareness of her body and more respect for physical grace, for the physical sensory world, she might be more like Rosa's mother, and hence, a better revolutionary. But the thing that bothers Rosa most about Clare is that she assumes, along with Dick and Ivy, that Rosa is "waiting" to find something to do. It is quite clear after her encounter with the Terblanches that Rosa cannot find a place for herself waiting for their idea of the Future, just as she could not find a place for herself in the retrograde order of the dorp.

Shortly after her encounter with Clare, Rosa comes into contact with another "type": the "black and beautiful" survivor, Marisa Kgosana, a character who in some ways seems to be modelled on Winnie Mandela. Marisa's husband, an important figure in the black liberation struggle and a colleague of Lionel's, has been imprisoned for several years on Robben Island. Marisa herself is banned and under house arrest. Nevertheless, to Rosa, she remains spiritually and sensually free, and radiates "a magnetic field of body" which is impossible for Rosa to resist. Marisa is perceived to be

some kind of redemptress: the sensuality Rosa feels in her presence reminds her of the feelings she experienced when in Baasie's presence. And so strong is her attraction to Marisa that the usually reserved Rosa thinks of attaching herself to "an acolyte destiny; to let someone else use me, lend me passionate purpose, propelled by meaning other than my own" (155). But, of course, this cannot be. For the one thing her encounter with Marisa makes her realize is the weakness of her perception of blacks, a perception taught to her by her parents. They have succeeded only in making her a "kaffir-boetie." (Baasie will accuse Rosa of this very thing when he confronts her near the end of the novel). For, she concludes, attempting to explain to herself the comfort she takes in "blackness," if one is not afraid, how can one not be attracted?

Wishing to stay in Marisa's orbit awhile longer, Rosa decides to go with her to Fat's place in the township.[14] Here Rosa sees "the place" she had gone in and out of so often as a child, the "place" she had ceased to see because "it had become too familiar," the "place" of "those millions who have been dispossessed and for whom other have made all the decisions" (149). Here, in the township, on the anniversary

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[14]It is at this point in the novel that Rosa attempts to define what she means by "place." She realizes it is a black term that whites have adopted. Blacks, she says, "don't talk about 'my house' or 'home.' A 'place' means somewhere to belong, but, as Rosa adds, thinking of it in relation to blacks, "also something that establishes one's lot and sets aside much to which one doesn't belong" (149).

of Lionel Burger's death, Rosa meets with various blacks, two of whom emerge most clearly as types. The first is Fats, her host, who wants his son to compete in a white-run international boxing match. The younger blacks in the room are outraged by this. They see Fats' interest in this kind of sporting arrangement as a mark of his cooperation with whites, as a sign of his exploitability. He emerges as one of those "middle-of-the-road" blacks faltering between loyalties that the South African government is always looking for. Fats is "the type" willing to be bought off for petty little successes like a better car or a bigger township house. The kind of black who gets fat off white patronage is not far removed from the leaders of the so-called "homelands" that have been carved out of South Africa. And the fact is there will always be people who will be enticed by this kind of placation. Then again, there are always others who will have nothing to do with it. Pitted against the politics of collaboration represented by Fats are the politics of exclusion exhibited by Duma. A militant, committed to black solidarity at any cost, Duma dispenses altogether with "whitey." He believes that in "this place" -- South Africa -- the white man sits with Vorster, and hence, his politics have everything to do with being white. In the Future Duma envisions, there is no room for whites, not even whites like Lionel Burger. Against the voice of black demagoguery, Rosa has no power. She and her father, she finds, have been blacked out. The Future her

father envisioned, with room enough for all, is nothing like the Future this arrogant black imagines. There is no "place" for her in it.

The strength of Rosa's need to find a place of her own is emphasized by the fact that she seeks help from Brandt Vermuelen, an Afrikaner like her father but one who is committed to "the Volk" instead of to "the Future." She is well aware that Lionel would consider her visit to Vermuelen a betrayal. She knows that each time she visits, she is entering

> a place that didn't exist for my father and that he would never have put me in, never, although he sent me to prisons; that he would never have set foot in himself . . . a place where a meeting was possible between those for whom skin is an absolute value and those for whom it is not a value at all; a place whose shameful existence recognizes a possibility of there being anything to say between migrant miners, factory workers, homeless servants, landless peasants and the class and colour that lives on them. (194)

But the fact is, she needs a passport. She wants to "know" somewhere other than her father's country.

Vermuelen is typed as a "new" Afrikaner: he is well-travelled, educated, widely-read and presumably enlightened,

similar in many ways to Mehring.[15] He is a favourite lecturer at symposia and Rotary Club luncheons, but what he speaks for is the same old thing. He speaks, as Boyers puts it, (turning to Rene Girard's Deceit, Desire and The Novel to make his point),

> for a connection that is fiercely defended despite the absence of a sacred center. That connection is less "a way of feeling and seeing," in Girard's terms, than "a closed culture" dedicated to keeping out or eliminating "foreign" elements. Its mode is predominantly negative in the sense that group membership is confirmed not by believing in something but by agreeing to keep out others who by conventional definition are unacceptable. For all of Brandt Vermuelen's invoking his people, the "rites of union" he celebrates are -- again in Girard's terms -- "rites of separation." (133)

So, there is nothing really new about this Afrikaner's

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[15]Vermuelen, according to Paul Rich, represents the "limited verligtheid" ("verligtheid" meaning, roughly, "enlightened" Afrikaner) that emerged as the effective political successor to the white liberal tradition. Vermuelen is harshly characterized in the novel, not only for his aesthetic pretensions, but for the moral inconsistencies riddling his political position. It is quite illuminating, particularly for her Western readers who are apt to think of most Afrikaner politicians as simply bigots and hence, philistine, that Gordimer creates such a detailed characterization of this type of Afrikaner.

politics which are still a politics of separatism and still bear the marks of allegiance to a kind of family. He is still after a peaceful co-existence without shared political power. What he wants, in essence, is a "friendly oppression." The only thing new about his politics is an element of public relations. For in securing Rosa a passport, Vermuelen makes the kind of "concessionary" gesture that can be read (as Rosa reads it -- she knows she is "the cap on his collection") as evidence of his "wide understanding" without suggesting for a minute any betrayal of his compatriots.[16]

But it is not only the acquisition of a passport that finally prompts Rosa to leave South Africa. It is an episode following a meeting she goes to at Flora Donaldson's that enforces her sense that there is no place for her in South Africa, neither in the present nor the Future. Flora Donaldson is a bourgeois liberal "type," resembling Antonia in certain ways, and as such, is severely characterized. Flora is not one of the "faithful," according to Rosa, but one of the "faithful hangers-on" (199). While scorning Flora's adventurism, Rosa admits unapologetically that Flora's temperament has been "made use of" by the faithful: it was she who hid Nelson Mandela in her cellar before the Rivonia Trial

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[16]Just as Clare was the "type" Rosa could have been, so Brandt Vermuelen was the "type" Lionel Burger could have been. Both men are age-mates and share the same heritage. Vermeulen does not have to tell Rosa that her father could have been Prime Minister if he had not been a "red." It had been said many times.

(197). Flora is seen, harshly, by Rosa as the type who dabbles in politics for the thrill of it. Recently, however, Flora has been instructed by her husband to play a "safe" role in the cause, and in coquettish deference to him, she organizes what Rosa calls a "harmless liberal activity," a women's meeting.[17] At bottom, the meeting seems to be staged for Flora's pleasure, as a way of keeping up her eccentric image. For instance, notice the flippant way in which she describes the meeting to Rosa:

> They'll be a mixed crowd of females . . . . we don't just want a lot of do-gooders and church women, we must drop white urban values and rope in some of the toughies with guts, the flamboyant ones. I wish the shebeen queens would come; and white prostitutes - why not? . . . . Even if we can close up a bit-close the hiatus between the politically-aware young women, those smashing black girls with the holoha hairdos--don't you love the way they look? That sort of "Topsy, and fuck-you" -- and the ordinary black woman . . .-- and at the same time get these white suburban good souls (basically, they're really concerned) to

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[17]Gordimer explains in her interview with Gardner that there are many "Floras" in South Africa. Highly intelligent, well-educated women who are nevertheless in a colonial kind of relationship with their husbands, and whose "social conscience" becomes a kind of "leisure-time" activity because their husbands are busy being the bread-winners and protectors.

tackle human rights as women . . . . (201)

Despite Flora's intentions, her meeting is really only another of her flirtations, this time with feminism. Based on such a premise, it is no wonder that the meeting fails in bringing women together in any significant way. Still, there is reason to question the particularly contemptuous eye Rosa casts on the assembly. Gordimer is particularly hard on Flora's kind of woman, and she is dismissive in her presentation of Flora's meeting. And outside her fiction, she has disturbed feminists by denying that she is a feminist writer, thereby abdicating responsibility for what feminism, in its broadest definition, sees as the duty of a woman writer.[18] And certainly, as Dorothy Driver points out in an excellent article, there are many ways in which Gordimer can be seen to be reactionary in her treatment of women.[19] Still, as Driver significantly indicates, there are also ways in which Gordimer can be understood through her often cynical characterizations to be addressing white women and insisting on their taking responsibility for their complicity in racism. This is perhaps the more fruitful way to understand Gordimer's treatment of certain female characters and situations. For in South Africa, as Gordimer has stated outside her fiction,

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[18]What Gordimer has said is that she is, or attempts to be, an androgynous writer.

[19]Dorothy Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women" in English in Africa 10 No.2 (October 1983).

the issue cannot be gender. The issue is colour. White women and white men, she insists, have more in common than white women and black women. The major problem with Flora's meeting lies in its lack of recognition of this fact:

> They didn't know why they were there, but as cross-purpose and unimaginable digressions grew louder with each half-audible, rambling or dignified or unconsciously funny discourse, clearer with each voluble inarticulacy, each clumsy, pathetic or pompous formulation of need in a life none of us white women (careful not to smile at broken English) live or would know how to live, no matter how much Flora protests the common possession of vaginas, wombs and breasts, the bearing of children and awful compulsive love of them-the silent old blacks dressed like respectable servants on a day off, although they were sitting in Flora's room, these were everything Flora's meeting was not succeeding to be about. (204)

In criticizing Flora's meeting, however, Gordimer should not be understood to be dismissing the possibility of the effectiveness of women's organizations in fighting racism in general. Her point seems to be that any women's organization that comes out and says it is apolitical is doomed. (Hence the groans and titters that greet the woman at Flora's meeting

who wants women to come together without the "intrusion" of politics). In the interview with Susan Gardner, for instance, Gordimer speaks highly of Black Sash, a women's organization

> that is opposing this government, that is opposing National Party Policy, and is now going further than the Progressive-Reform Party policy and all the white political parties. (105)

After the meeting and after dropping a black woman off in the township, Rosa loses herself in one of those "places" that doesn't exist on the map. Here she sees a black man brutally beating a donkey, but it is not the whip she sees, it is the agony:

> Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain, broken away from the will that creates it, broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond control of humans who have spent thousands of years devising it. (208)

The spectacle of donkey, cart and driver comes, as J.M. Coetzee says, from "the inner reaches of Dante's hell, beyond

the scope of morality."[20] And for that reason it is an act that is "out of the ambit of moral judgement," which is why Rosa cannot act to stop it. "For morality is human," Coetzee continues, "whereas the two figures locked to the cart belong to a damned, dehumanized world"(35). Effects are dislocated from causes and take on a terrible life of their own. Consequently, the typically cerebral Rosa stops thinking and finally, stunningly, reacts to a situation with full-blown emotion. But she does not act. She admits she doesn't know at what point "to intercede makes sense." She doesn't want to be seen as another one of those whites who cares more for animals than for human beings.

What this episode has done is put Rosa in her "place." It has defined her, as Coetzee puts it, "as within the sphere of humanity."[21] In a political sense, her response can be

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[20]J.M. Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa" in The New York Times Book Review, January 12, 1986: 13,35. In this essay, Coetzee discusses the dilemma of the artist in South Africa who attempts to take as his or her province "the whole of life." The torture chamber cannot be meaningfully gazed upon by the author in this society, writes Coetzee, because the author is limited to only two choices. He can either "look on in horrified fascination as the blows fall" or turn his eyes away (35). The donkey scene in Gordimer's Burger's Daughter is an exception, however, and is singled out as an example of a meaningful way in which to "gaze" on a scene of torture.

[21]Coetzee points out that what Rosa flees from in fleeing South Africa "is the negative illumination that there exists another world parallel to hers, no farther away than a half-hour's drive, a world of blind force and mute suffering, debased, beneath good and evil." What Rosa suffers and waits for, he suggests, "is a time when humanity will be restored across the face of society, and therefore when all human acts, including the flogging of an animal will be returned to the

understood as a failure, lacking as it is in action. But in a strictly personal sense, it is not. It is a relief to hear Rosa respond in such a way that substantiates her as a feeling human being, and to be able to empathize with her confusion and paralysis in the face of such suffering. It is not hard, then, to understand the problem she faces of how to act, her feeling that significant political action is beyond her reach and, most of all, her desire to recoil into self.

Several critics have observed that what Rosa must do is learn that her response to the donkey beating is but a preliminary one, to be followed ideally by the properly political response of interceding wherever one can, the implication being that in failing to act, an individual makes herself a victim (Boyers, 143). But this is precisely what Rosa is and has been up to this point in the novel, so it is fitting that her preliminary response harbours in it such an admission. She has been a victim, not only of the horrors and contradictions of her place, but of others' ideas of the right kind of political activity, of her father's overshadowing example and of Conrad's influence. "She" has been denied, unable to be found, in this place. Yet paradoxically the donkey episode has also ungagged her. She feels herself responding to it in a "code" that is not Lionel's, not Conrad's, but her own (196). She is making, for the first time, her "own metaphors for suffering" (196). Significantly,

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ambit of moral judgement"(35).

then, it is this episode that persuades her to throw off all that has been oppressing her. She leaves the country for France without telling any of the "faithful" her reasons; she seeks out Lionel's first wife there because she wants to learn how to "defect" from her father; and she stops talking to Conrad as she realizes she may have been talking all along to a "dead man".

When, at the end of the first section, Rosa confesses that she doesn't know how to live in Lionel's country anymore, it is easy to understand her flight from it, to understand the flight as necessary for self-discovery, even preservation rather than as a cowardly opting-out. But the epigraph prefacing the second section of the novel (a section that deals with Rosa in France and in London) casts a shadow over her decision to leave. It reads "To know and not to act is not to know" and it buttresses Boyers' point that Rosa's inability to act is only a preliminary response. In order for her to think politically and knowingly, she must strive to act upon events as best she can. We have Rosa's confession before us -- she does not know how to act in South Africa -- and we have the epigraph shaping our reading of what her flight to France will signify. We can guess from the epigraph that France will not mean permanent sanctuary for Rosa, rather, that it will mean knowledge, of her self and of her inherited circumstances, which will then give her the strength to act. Her fate is fixed, but not before she is given an opportunity

to seek out some measure of personal intensity.

The second section of Burger's Daughter is addressed to Lionel Burger's first wife, a failed revolutionary who was kicked out of the Communist Party for displaying bourgeois tendencies (she had a fondness for fancy shoes), and a woman who, like Marisa, becomes significant to Rosa emotionally and as a model. Rosa calls her Katya, the name she was given when with Lionel, but she is also known as Madame Bagnelli and originally, as Colette Swann. It is fitting that Rosa, at this stage in her career, should be drawn to someone who couldn't live up to the demands of real commitment, who left South Africa to transplant herself in France "where nobody expects you to be other than you are." And quickly, the life of leisure, niceties and individualism works its charm on Rosa. She dissolves in the wine and pleasure of the place and is, significantly, renamed. Significantly because here, in France, she is not "typed." She is not on the lists as a "named" person. She is not "Lionel's daughter" or "Burger's daughter"; she is "Rosa" with the accent on the final syllable (219). Here, in this place, "she" is catered to, as the room Katya arranged for her expresses:

> It was a room made ready for someone imagined. A girl, a creature whose sense of existence would be in her nose buried in flowers, peach juice running down

> her chin, face tended at mirrors, mind dreamily diverted, body seeking pleasure. Rosa Burger entered, going forward into possession by that image. (229-30)

Yet, as much as she is accepted by the people of the village -- no one can see her there for what she is back home -- she knows she is "out of place" (235). Her life is not theirs. She is far removed from it even though she participates in it:

> I giggle with their Katya like the adolescent girls at school, who were in that phase while Sopho Mokoena was showing Tony and me the bullet hole in his trouser-leg and I was running back and forth to prison . . . . (236)

She types the code of life that is so foreign to her:

> . . .live where it's warm, buy, sell or take pleasure honestly . . . . They recognize their only imperatives as dependence on a tight-knotted net of friendship, and dedication to avoiding tax wherever possible while using all the state welfare one can contrive to qualify for -- the rebates, allocations, grants, and pensions they are always discussing, whether rich or poor. (241-2)

Still, strange as this way of life is to Rosa, it provides her with something she has never had, the right to be girlish. She admits to herself that she has never talked with anyone as she has talked with Katya, "incontinently, femininely" (262). She feels happy with Katya, and at ease. As well as claiming a sense of herself through her conversations with Katya, Rosa feels for the first time an ability to live in the present, to live "outside" of Lionel. For she has gone to Katya not to learn about her father, but to learn how "to defect" from him as Katya has done.

Despite the personal triumphs Rosa experiences in France, it is quickly understood that this cannot be the "place" for her. An encounter with Didier, a young "companion" to one of the old, rich women of the village, reinforces this. Didier is also from Africa, from Mauritis, but to him, the place means nothing, only "filth and poverty." Whereas the fact that Rosa was born in South Africa and that it was her home matter to her, Didier can shrug off his place like an ill-fitting jacket. What matters for him is that a person finds a place where he can live the way he likes. Roots, ancestry, heritage don't matter. But Rosa counters with another fact--that her father died in prison there. Again, Didier is dismissive. His father was also in prison -- for collaborating with the Germans. His advice to Rosa is this: we have to forget about them, we are not our fathers (243).

From our reading of The Conservationist, we discovered that to sever oneself from the ties of place and kinship is not the best way to live one's life. Rosa seems to become aware of this through her encounter with Didier: she can't ignore her roots and is surprised by Didier's ability to turn his back on his. (In his case, though, perhaps it is understandable. His father's politics are cause for embarrassment whereas Lionel's politics engender respect). Already, in being out of South Africa and knowing another place, Rosa is beginning, with more understanding, to define her own place. It is clear from her exchange with Didier that she isn't persuaded by the option of "forgetting" one's homeland and one's parents as a way of living well.

One of the most satisfying but short-lived things that happens to Rosa in France is her affair with a married teacher, Bernard Chabalier. She takes him as a lover and we rejoice with her for it has been this side of her, her sexuality, that has been most cruelly disregarded by her parents' political machinations (remember her "performance" as De Witt's fiance, complicated by the fact that she actually fell in love with the man). It is with vehemence that she asserts her relationship with Bernard "has nothing to do with passion that had to be learned to deceive prison wardens, and you're ¿Bernard¿ no real revolutionary waiting to decode my lovey-dovey as I dutifully record it" (279). Bernard loves her simply for herself, not because of her important father.

Through their love, they create a place in the sensual world of the present in which Rosa feels secure. There is no split between how others see her (remember her question following the opening segment of the book: "when they saw me outside the prison, what did they see?") and how she sees herself. For instance, here is how she is described in the bar that serves as her and her lover's meeting-place:

> She inhabited it completely as everything in place around her, there and then. In the bar where she had sat seeing others living in the mirror, there was no threshold between her reflection and herself. (272)

Subsumed by passion for Bernard, Rosa blossoms into "the little Rose." Her lover defines her body, her life. She luxuriates in the moment-to-moment world they create together. Certain things he says "become the text" she lives by. She even considers the possibility of living within "the ambit of a person" rather than a country, no doubt a tempting option. The life of a mistress initially appeals to her. It would be so personal and private, she thinks, and then she would no longer be accountable to "the Future." She would no longer be Burger's daughter, but Chabalier's mistress. She makes plans to live her life this way, in a flat near the school in Paris where Bernard teaches, but several incidents work together to shatter them.

The first incident is something that arises after Rosa views two of Bonnard's paintings with Bernard. Bernard explains to her that there were fifty years between the paintings -- years which saw the growth of Fascism, two wars and the Occupation -- yet, for the artist, it is as if nothing has happened. The paintings look as if they were painted the same day. Bernard equates this quality, which is an indifference to history, to the attitudes of the villagers. "That's how they live, as if nothing has happened -- to them or anybody." It is "un paradis invente." And it is this phrase -- "un paradis invente" -- that recurs in Rosa's consciousness almost as a warning: she begins to realize that her desire to create a place for herself within the ambit of Chabelier would be such a paradise. She would sit there, in her Paris apartment, like the woman in Bonnard's painting or the woman in the Cluny tapestry, "gazing, gazing," a creature denying her own self-hood, indifferent to the world outside, disconnected from any past or future.

Bernard goes to Paris to start making plans for what he hopes is Rosa's stay, while Rosa goes to London. There, at a meeting of South African exiles, Rosa sees Baasie, the black child she grew up with, but they speak only halfheartedly to each other. Later that night, he phones her, venting his bitterness and hostility towards her. He too has been renamed. He is no longer Baasie ("little boss"), he is Zwelinzima (which means "suffering land"), and he is full of

the rhetoric of Black consciousness. He is angry at Rosa because of the things she said in "that place." It is always "Burger this, Burger that", he complains, "everything whites touch, its a takeover." What about the black fathers that die? Zwelinzima renounces the paternalism of Lionel and what he sees as the insincere kinship encouraged in the Burger house. He forces Rosa to turn the light on as if to see him not as her little black brother but as "other." The two hurl accusations and insults at each other, the result being that

> in one night we succeeded in manoeuvring ourselves into the position their history books back home have for us - him bitter, me guilty. What other meeting-place could there have been for us? (330)

The problem of a meeting-place for blacks and whites is one that recurs in Gordimer's fiction; one of her short story collections includes in it a work titled "Isn't there Some Place We Can Meet?" And there certainly doesn't seem to be much chance of a meeting-place between blacks and whites in this setting either. This is what Rosa decides after the fight between two of Lionel's children. That the meeting place her father was working towards cannot be; in a sense, that his idea of the Future was wrong. Yet the implication seems to be that Rosa cannot expect better ground on which to meet unless she strives to act. The confrontation with Baasie

has been cathartic for her; after it, she cries, finally, for her two dead brothers, Baasie and Tony, and for the realization that her father only seemed to provide "a place where no fear, hurt or pain existed."

But it is not the episode with Baasie that causes Rosa to return to South Africa. It is her memory in France of the woman in the nightdress in the street. The woman, "out of place," who couldn't remember what day it was and ran outside in panic. Rosa recognizes her panic as due to a "free range life", a life of "mementoes" lacking in a past or future, in any significant relation to the public world. She now sees the woman as "a hamster turning her female treadmill" and Rosa's "sense of sorority" becomes clear. If she stays in France, living a private life in the present but a life isolated from historical circumstances, she will end up like this woman, like Katya, like "anyone else." And she doesn't want to limit herself to being "like anyone else." What Rosa finally recognizes is that she cannot exist as if nothing had happened to her, that her past and her place are so much a part of what has made her. She understands it is better to be bound by those circumstances than to a married man. In coming to this understanding, Rosa finds her own "place." Her father is no longer the one defining her life. The amazing revelation Rosa comes to is this: that "nothing can be avoided" and that "no one can defect." Her relation to the public realm has to be more than fleeting, it has to be

significant. Thus, she becomes politically engaged in her own terms, terms that have nothing to do with any party line, or with any specific sense of where the future is heading, just this:

> I don't know the ideology.
> It's about suffering.
> How to end suffering.
> And it ends in suffering. (332)

And she cures her own paralysis by taking up a profession similar to her father's; she teaches people how to walk again at Baragwanath Hospital.

The third and last section of the novel, in which Rosa's re-engagement occurs, is addressed to Lionel. Because of her new-found identity, both private and political, Rosa can at last address her father and address him as an equal. While she admires her father's "sublime lucidity" and his "elation," she now understands that his vision of the Future no longer holds. The South Africa she has come back to, their "place", of which she can talk about only to him, has been agitated by an uprising of black children. The "revolutionary initiative" has come from them -- not from "the people" as Lionel had thought, but from "the people's children." Black children, revolting against being instructed in the language of the

oppressors, have demanded that they have power over their lives instead of a destiny "invented, decreed and enforced by white governments"(349). The Future, says Rosa, is in their hands. "They seem to know what is to be done"(348). In saying this, Rosa is taking her future into her own hands. She too knows what is to be done.

The Soweto uprising, however, is a very direct challenge to Burger's kind of white radicalism. For the Soweto revolt is a revolt that Rosa recognizes as "peculiarly" the blacks' "own." They are the ones who have organized it, articulated it, and acted it out. Radical whites have had no place in it, even if the authorities cannot believe that the children revolted of their own volition. As if out of respect for the autonomy of the uprising, Gordimer inserts into her text, without explanation, a document written by the representatives of the Soweto Student Council. In doing so, she can be understood to be allowing the students to speak for themselves, in their own voices. What Rosa recognizes is that she must find her own way to fit in to the struggle.

This section of the novel is prefaced by the Afrikaner motto "Peace.Land.Bread." (which, but for one striking difference, is similar to Lenin's rallying cry: "Peace.Bread.Freedom") and its placement here may be understood as Rosa's way of paying a kind of homage to her ancestry. However, it is more probable that the motto is to be understood ironically, for the order of life represented by

it and everything done in the name of the motto have been jeopardized in this section. Not only in the larger historical sense by the Soweto Riot, but on a smaller scale by the activities of the reactionaries' children. The Nels' vision of the Future, for instance, which foresaw everything they had maintained, conserved and possessed passed on to blood relations, is obscured by the fact that their daughter, Rosa's cousin, has been imprisoned for harbouring a terrorist. Yet Rosa can go back to the Nels "place" to sleep in the rondavel the way she had when she was a child (332). Despite Katya's remarks over the lack of continuity for whites in South Africa, it is made clear in this passage that there is some continuity here for Rosa. In place, she can sleep soundly and securely.

In place, Rosa is doing what she can. We suspect she must have been engaged in some underground political activity because of the impact Order Greer's speech to the court made on her. She read an excerpt from it in the newspaper and it refutes the pessimism she felt through her encounter with Baasie over white involvement in the struggle. Greer, sentenced to life imprisonment for treason, emerges as a freedom fighter and at his trial, hundreds of blacks crowded outside the courtroom. In explaining his reasons to the court for asking a young liberal to steal confidential military information, Greer begins by saying he acted according to "necessity." "I would rather go to prison now," he continued,

"for acting against evil than have waited to be detained without even having done anything"(338). Whatever action Rosa decided to take, if any, is not specified. However, we do know that in October 1977 she is detained, along with thousands of others, among them, Clare and Marisa, without charges and is imprisoned. Her lawyer thinks that the State will probably try to establish that Rosa was in collusion with Marisa to further the aims of Communism. The strange thing is that Rosa's imprisonment is not relayed as a defeat or a tragedy, but is, in a sense, to be understood as a personal and, in a limited way, a political triumph.

In the prison Rosa finds herself, the barriers between colours are broken down. Her sense of sorority <u>is</u> clear: she is truly part of an interrracial community of women who communicate among themselves via song, dropped messages and clandestine meetings. The significance of her stay in France is revealed in Rosa's pastime in prison: she paints watercolours of boats and mountains and sunny skies.

Whereas she was outside the prison in the opening pages of the novel, bearing messages to those inside, she is now, at the novel's end, in prison, as both her parents were, and is sending her own messages for those outside to decipher. For instance, she paints Christmas cards that she sends to her friends. They know that the carollers oddly drawn on the card signify that Rosa, Clare, Marisa and others are inside and that they are in touch with each other. And where Rosa

understood as a girl that she was "in place" outside the prison, connected somehow to her mother inside, there is now the understanding that she is "in place" in prison, connected to those she is among and to those friends outside.

What also prevents us from understanding the ending of the novel as a tragedy is the physical description Flora gives us of Rosa. We are told that Rosa looks like a little girl, and that she seems livelier, less reserved. The novel ends with Rosa sending a letter to Katya. She mentions in the letter a watermark of light in her cell that gives her pleasure, the same thing Lionel referred to in his cell, but the censor has crossed the line out. Katya, we are told, in the final sentence of the novel, cannot make it out. And that is because she never could understand. She was not a real revolutionary. She is excluded from what matters. Rosa, on the other hand, though in prison, is not excluded from anything. In fact, in prison, she is liberated. After undergoing a process of finding her identity, she fulfills her responsibility to herself and to her society.

The "Bigger Game" of J.M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K

Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee are both white South Africans -- the former is of European descent, the latter of Afrikans -- and both are novelists with large audiences in the North and West. Consequently, it is common for them to be compared by critics, if only to be contrasted.[1] Typically, Gordimer and Coetzee are linked in critics' minds by their colour and by the coincidence of their geographic location; they are often evaluated in terms of who makes the more "essential" gesture.

Gordimer herself entered the debate with a review of Coetzee's novel, Life and Times of Michael K.[2] It is a difficult review to assess because of its ambivalence; however, amidst claims for the novel's greatness, Gordimer raises several questions concerning certain aspects of the novel and one striking criticism. She maintains, as we have seen, that in the novel "the organicism that Lukács defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny is

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[1]See Richard Martin's "Narrative, History and Ideology: A Study of Waiting for the Barbarians and Burger's Daughter" in Ariel, Vol. 17, No. 3, July 1986, 3-21. See also Paul Rich's "Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine Gordimer's July's People and J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians" in Research in African Literatures, 15, No.3 (Fall 1984), 364-91.

[2]Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," The New York Review of Books (February 2, 1984), 3-6.

distorted here more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer"(6).

It is not surprising, then, given her insistence in her fiction on characters' acknowledging and acting upon their historical circumstances, to find that what disturbs Gordimer most about Coetzee's novel is his choice of a protagonist. By choosing as his protagonist a figure who ignores history rather than makes it, Coetzee is, Gordimer writes, "denying the energy of the will to resist evil" that she sees evidence of in Africans (6). What Gordimer seems to be implying is that Coetzee's assumptions are too naturalistic in his novel-- that Michael K is not "typical" in Lukácsian terms; he is not representative of a particular social and historical movement. To make Michael K a recognizable type, Gordimer provides him in her review with a surname which would root him firmly in the Cape as a Coloured (3). By naming him "Kotze or Koekemoer," she chooses to deny the more general, associative and suggestive implications of the surname "K".

There is not the plethora of articles, interviews and lectures detailing Coetzee's views about a writer's responsibility that there is for Gordimer, yet a comment he made on Gordimer in a 1978 Speak interview is telling. Here he reveals an admiration for Gordimer's accomplishments in the critical realist mode with this addendum: "I would like to think that today the novel is after a bigger game than [the

critical realist type]."[3] Coetzee's comment is worth remembering in light of Gordimer's criticism of his novel.[4] But what is more important is the fact that his comment provides us with a way into what I consider to be his finest novel, Life and Times of Michael K.[5] We can begin a discussion of the work by asking just what is the "bigger game" Coetzee is after. We can also consider the kinds of strategies he employs to help guide our reading of the novel.

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[3]J. M. Coetzee interviewed by Stephen Watson. "Speaking: J. M. Coetzee," Speak (May/June 1978), 23.

[4]Gordimer's criticism might be answered as well with the help of an essay of Coetzee's titled "Alex La Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer" in Journal of New African Literature and the Arts (Winter/Spring Combined 1971), 5-11. Coetzee sets out in this essay to assert that despite "its naturalistic assumptions and doom-laden atmosphere," La Guma's A Walk in the Night is not naturalistic. Coetzee reads La Guma as a "critical realist" and sees embedded in the novel "an analysis of the political weakness of [the proletariat in] Coloured society in South Africa" (9). For Coetzee, this analysis provides 'an explanation of the negativeness of a fiction that realistically portrays that society" (9). The most comprehensive political statement La Guma makes, says Coetzee, is that A Walk in the Night is a novel without a hero, although it is clearly indicated who the potential hero is. It is possible to answer Gordimer's challenge by reading Life and Times of Michael K in the same way Coetzee reads A Walk in the Night and to suggest that the reason there is no active protagonist in Coetzee's novel is that, as far as he is concerned, the conditions haven't arisen for one. His literary act may be described in the words he uses to describe La Guma's: "while the novelist cannot falsify his subject by creating heroes where none as yet have arisen, he can explain why they have not arisen and point to potentialities for heroic action" (11).

[5]J. M. Coetzee, Life and Times of Michael K (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation in parentheses.

Finally, after a close look at certain aspects of the work, we can then move to answer some of the objections raised against it. An earlier novel of Coetzee's, Waiting for the Barbarians, will also be discussed in relation to some of the ideas raised in Life and Times of Michael K.

> The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip. (3)

When we look back at this, the opening line of his novel, we can see that Coetzee is doing something exceptional. He is drawing our attention to something other than the colour of his protagonist. The first thing the midwife notices and that we, in turn, are made to notice about Michael K is his hare lip. We might wonder what to make of this point of focus. What is it saying about the character of Michael K? About Coetzee?

One of the first things that comes to mind from Coeztee's focus on his protagonist's physical deformity is the possibility that it sets Michael K in a particular literary tradition. We think of other famous protagonists with physical afflictions -- King Oedipus, for one, with his "swellfoot" and Lancelot, the "ill-made" knight, for another. We might then begin to wonder if Michael K is going to be a

tragic hero, and, if so, is his deformity, which affects the organ of speech, going to have something to do with his downfall. But a few lines further in the novel, we see that K's deformity identifies him not with tragic heroes, but with freaks. As the midwife says of Michael K to his repulsed mother: "You should be happy, they bring luck to the household"(3).

What this point of focus tells us about the character of Michael K is that he is not going to be an Everyman. Nor is it likely that he will be correspondent to a Lukáscian type. Instead, the impression created is, simply, that Michael K is going to be a particular figure, and one who happens to be distinguished by a hare lip. The significance of his surname, which, of course, gives him greater symbolic weight than the aforementioned allows, will be dealt with presently.

But first, readers are certain to wonder whether or not Coetzee is colour blind. It is clear, after all, from the place names in the novel that it is set in South Africa. Michael K works in "the Cape"; he journeys to "Prince Albert"; "Stellenbosch" is a place of ill-luck. It is also clear from Michael K's position in society that he is not a member of the ruling class. So it should be equally clear that Michael K is not white. But on the issue that so resoundingly defines South Africa, its politics and its people, the issue of colour, Coetzee chooses to be silent and this silence creates a space which begs to be filled. And while it is tempting to

do as some have done and interpret his silence, particularly in light of the volatile context out of which it emerges, as irresponsible, surely there are more positive inferences to be drawn from it? To call Michael K anything, be it black, white or coloured, is to label him. It is quite possible that Coetzee deliberately omits mentioning Michael K's colour precisely because he doesn't want Michael K to be labelled. Because colour, while a burning issue on the one hand, is, on the other, just as urgent a non-issue. A person is a person no matter what his colour. One of the problems with the process of politicization, particularly as it operates in South Africa, is that it systematically reduces people into categories. It de-individualizes and dehumanizes them. By creating a protagonist who eludes classification, Coetzee can be seen to be resisting this process. Omitting the detail of colour from his characterization of Michael K is just one of the strategies Coetzee employs to prevent us from making hasty generalizations about his novel.

There are some critics who have commented passionately on what they see as Coetzee's racial/historical/class bias operating in Life and Times of Michael K.[6] They make the point that typically Coetzee's protagonists are white and that they are also lucid and intelligent (Eugene Dawn; Magda; the Magistrate). What is disconcerting to them is the fact that

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[6]See Josephine Dodd's The Crossroads of Power and Knowledge: Discursive Policy and the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1987.

on the occasion Coetzee chooses to write from a "non-white" perspective, he depicts a figure who is inarticulate and simple-minded. Restrained as she is about it, I think this is Gordimer's problem with the novel. At one point in her review, she asks why Coetzee has to "lay it on so thick." It is not enough that Michael K is one of the oppressed and a simpleton, he has to have a hare lip that prevents him from speaking clearly. Why single out for attention such an eccentric, atypical figure, she seems to be asking.

Again, it is fruitful to turn back to Coetzee's idea of "bigger game" for at least a partial answer to these kinds of queries. Clearly, his characterizations are more subtle than Gordimer's. For example, just as he is quiet over the issue of Michael K's colour, so he is over the question of Michael K's intelligence. The ambivalent responses that the character of Michael K evokes have as much to do with other characters' assessments of him as with our care in reading him. Of the other characters in the novel, most see Michael K as an idiot and one sees him as a saint. Such polarization is apparent in critical responses to K, a polarization that brings to mind responses to Dostoevsky's Prince Mishkin.

If we read Coetzee's novel carefully, we can avoid the pitfall of labelling Michael K as either saint or idiot. He may not be clever in the worldly, glib sense of the word, but neither is he an idiot. After all, we are taken into his consciousness in the first and third sections of the novel; in

both places we are met with examples of sophisticated thought, and in the first section, we are given reasons other than a lack of intelligence to explain Michael K's passivity.

In the opening pages of Life and Times of Michael K, for instance, we learn that because their smiles and whispers hurt her, Anna K kept her son away from other children. She took him to work with her where "year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" (4).

His childhood, then, is spent in isolation, away from other children, his activities limited to observing his mother labour for other people and learning to "be quiet." We are then told that he was sent to Huis Norenius, a state-sponsored school, not because he was stupid, but "because of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick"(4). After leaving the school at fifteen, he took on a job as gardener for the city of Cape Town, then left it, we are not told why, for the job of night-attendant in the public lavatories. He gets beaten up one night coming home from work, so he decides to rejoin the Parks and Gardens.

The significant thing about both jobs for Michael K was that they offered him "a measure of solitariness"(5). Here, clearly, is someone who is easiest when by himself. It is fitting, then, that he should also be one of those who seeks out the dark places: the public lavatories at night, and the parks "with the tall pine trees and dim agapanthus walks"(5).

There is evidence of Michael K's contemplative nature early on in the novel, as well as evidence of his moral consciousness. Though he dislikes the physical intimacy his mother's cramped room forces on the two of them, "he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty"(8). It is made plain by this passage that Michael K sees things in terms of obligation and responsibility. Immediately after this discovery, we learn also that Michael K is more than an ordinary thinker:

> The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenius, namely why had he been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother. (8-9)

He is a kind of philosopher. For years, the question he has wrestled with -- why am I here? -- is perhaps the biggest question of them all. His answer to this question is also significant for it, to a large extent, will govern K's actions in the novel. As will later be shown, there is a sense in which K can be seen to be looking after his mother when he formulates his idea of gardening.

Coetzee sets up his novel in a way that keeps us wondering, guessing and speculating. Borges' idea, that in ambiguity, richness lies, is obviously a compelling one for

Coetzee.[7] The title of his novel, for example, signals a picaresque, but what Coetzee offers us is a bizarre variation on the genre. Life and Times of Michael K is a novel of the road, but it is a road marked by checkpoints, soldiers in arms, convoys of military vehicles and armies of the dispossessed. Its protagonist wanders from place to place--not like his literary predecessors, from city salon to country pub, but from work camp to deserted farm to a closet by the sea. The society he endeavours to move through is not a stable one, it is a war zone. It is South Africa in a projected future, and freedom of movement is rapidly being curtailed. Curfews are in effect, buses run erratically and permits to travel to the interior, which is where Michael and Anna K want to go, are impossible to get. Donkeys cost a fortune in the new currency, yet the cities are not safe to live in. There is a shortage of food, outbreaks of violence are frequent and looting is commonplace. And Anna K is gravely ill. She wants to go to the countryside, to the place of her girlhood; Prince Albert. K does not question the logistics of her plan. Instead, with his ailing mother in a cart he fashions from a crate, some wire and an old bicycle, he finds himself, along with legions of others, on the road that leads out of the city. The situation of the novel -- a situation of war and chaos in which no one has control over

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[7]Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote" in Labryinths, p.42. The actual phrase Borges uses is "ambiguity is richness."

his or her own life -- seems to demand that lives become picaresques, and that they go through a series of rapid changes of misfortune which may or may not add up to something.

K and his mother's journey out of Sea Point embodies such changes. The first time K and his mother try to leave Sea Point, they are turned back by a checkpoint guard. The second time, they manage to make their way, but unfortunately, Anna K's health deteriorates to the point where K must take her to a hospital. Several days later, she dies there. K is given his mother's ashes, a change of clothes, and he sets off to Prince Albert alone to bury his mother. Before he gets to Prince Albert, however, he is forced to work laying track for a railway gang. He manages to escape from the gang and make his way to what he thinks is the farm of his mother's childhood. At the Visagie farm, he begins his life as a cultivator, but shortly thereafter, his peace is disturbed by the arrival of a deserter. K is not interested in cooperating with the young man, so he leaves the farm and is soon picked up and put into another internment camp.

On his wanderings, Michael K meets people from various sections of society: police, prison guards, internees, other vagrants. But he is by no means a typical picaro. He is not a clever and amusing adventurer making his way by tricks and roguery. On the contrary, he is a quiet and solitary creature who, despite gruelling set-backs, manages to summon up enough

firmness to carry on, to devise ways, spare though they may be, in which he can live. Like the traditional picaro, Michael K is of humble origins, but unlike him, K does not by the novel's end change to conform even outwardly to the demands of society. He ends as he began: free -- from the camps and, he hopes, from charity.

For Michael K has won through to the understanding that it is charity, in part, that keeps the system going. He has seen how his mother's life has hinged on the "unreliable charity" of the Buhrmann's and he himself has lived under the charity of Huis Norenius, the state-sponsored orphanage. He knows it is better not to have to rely on other people, so he does not seek them out, nor is he even sure if he believes in helping them(65).

Although this is a novel in which many small acts of kindness occur (the package of clothes given to Michael K by a nurse, the hospitality extended to him by a stranger and his family on the way to Prince Albert), there is a negative side to "giving" of which Michael K is wary. It is hard for him to understand the motives of some of those who give -- like the silver-wigged girl who masturbates him at the end of the novel. K intuits that there must be some strings attached to certain acts of giving designed to shame or enslave the recipient. And surely there are -- the "sex" the girl offers Michael K is demeaning and against nature; it is not procreative. A captain of the Jakkalsdrif camp in which

Michael K finds himself interned displays the manipulative use of charity in a speech that precedes the destruction of what little personal property the internees have:

> Who builds houses for you when you have nowhere to live? Who gives you tents and blankets when you are shivering with cold? Who nurses you, who takes care of you, who comes here day after day with food? And how do you repay us? Well, from now on you can starve! (126)

Michael K is not interested in the kind of nurturing the camps practice. Shortly after this episode, he climbs the barbed wire fence and simply walks out of the camp.

He refuses to be caged and he refuses to become other than what he is. In refusing, one could say he shows more initiative, energy and imagination than the acquiescing ones. History, or, more precisely, war, which, as the epigraph to the novel explains, "is the father of all and king of all," has revealed Michael K to be free.[8] The gods are absent in this story, as perhaps they are in South Africa, imprisoned in Pollsmoor, in exile in France or under house arrest and banning orders in some Afrikaner strong-hold. The men are in

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[8]The epigraph is from G.S. Kirk's translation of Heraclitus' The Cosmic Fragments. It reads as follows:

War is the father of all and king of all.
Some he shows as gods, others as men.
Some he makes slaves, and others free.

the story, trying to feed their families like Robert, or fighting their own war like the guerrillas. Then there are those enslaved by the circumstances the war foists upon them-- like the Doctor and the prison guard -- men trapped by the regime, working for it even though they bitterly contest its motives. But men nevertheless acting as best they can given the circumstances. Only Michael K is free. He is the one figure in the novel who is able to compete, to some extent, with the power of History. His desire to live as he is is the source of his strength; it lies at the core of his peculiar form of resistance, and is the reason why he is, as he says, out of the war. It is not because he is slow-thinking, a bad story-teller, or because he has a hare lip. He is out of the war because his whole being is engaged in existing on his own terms. He is simply not responsive to being determined by anything outside of them. However, those terms make him vulnerable, particularly to those embroiled in and dependent on history. So, in order to survive, K decides, after returning to the farm from the second camp, to burrow himself underground so as to leave no trace of his living.

Franz Kafka wrote a short story called "The Burrow," a story which Coetzee has written on and may have been thinking of when he had his protagonist attempt to preserve his privacy

by burrowing underground.[9] This is but one example of the several allusions made to Kafka in Life and Times of Michael K.[10] There are others that encourage us to look for larger notions of the Kafkaesque in Coetzee's work. For example, as his surname suggests, Michael K has ties with Joseph K in Kafka's The Trial and with the surveyor K in The Castle. As well, the Doctor in the rehabilitation camp in Coetzee's novel refers to "the Castle" (212) as the place from which his bizarre orders issue. What are we to make of these correspondences?

Before we take them too far, it might be useful to consider what the notion of the Kafkaesque includes, and in what ways and to what purpose Coetzee's novel reflects some of its aspects. We can then turn to a discussion of "The Burrow" as it relates to and diverges from the predicament of Michael K.[11]

In an essay in Granta titled "Somewhere Behind," Milan

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[9]See J.M. Coetzee's "Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's 'The Burrow'" in MLN, Vol. 96, No.3, April 1981, 556-579.

[10]Coetzee himself, however, will not take responsibility for such allusions. In an interview in TriQuarterly, for example, he answers the interviewer's question over the connections between Kafka's K and Michael K by saying he does not believe that "Kafka has exclusive right to the letter K, nor that Prague is the center of the universe" (457). Tony Morphet, "Two Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987" in From South Africa, Special Issue of TriQuarterly 69 (Spring/Summer 1987), 454-64.

[11]Franz Kafka, "The Burrow" in The Complete Stories. Ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 325-59.

Kundera, a Czechoslovakian like Kafka, who now lives in exile in France, sets out to describe the phenomenon of the Kafkaesque.[12] He outlines four aspects of the phenomenon and then goes on to explain the extent to which "images, situations and even the individual lines of Kafka's novels" are part of life in Prague. Before providing a reason for this merging of real life in Prague with the novels of Kafka, Kundera corrects notions of others who have attempted to explain Kafka's work "as a critique of industrial society, of exploitation, of alienation, of bourgeois morality -- of capitalism, in a word"(83). Instead, Kundera sees the notion of the Kafkaesque as separate from sociology or politics:

> . . . there is almost nothing of what constitutes capitalism in Kafka's universe: money is absent, as is the power of money, together with trade, wage-employment, property, owners and the class struggle. (83)

As well, the notion of the Kafkaesque "does not correspond to a definition of totalitarianism either. The party, ideology and its jargon, politics . . . are all equally missing from Kafka's works"(83).

Many readers of Coetzee's novel, Gordimer among them, have commented on the fact that there are political implications

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[12]Milan Kundera, "Somewhere Behind," Granta 11, 1984, 77-91.

everywhere in it, but that the only idea that explicitly emerges from it is "the idea of gardening."[13] Similarly, the fact that the novel is set in South Africa, a totalitarian state, but lacks direct references to the system and its politics has also been cause for some harsh criticism. These absences from the novel have drawn some critics to conclude that Coetzee is insufficiently committed or morally irresponsible. However, it can be argued that it is precisely in these absences, including the absence of colour, that Coetzee can be seen to be subscribing to the notion of the Kafkaesque, which, as Kundera illustrates, is "something behind" sociology, politics, even history. What the Kafkaesque more properly represents, writes Kundera, is

> one elementary potentiality of man and his world, a potentiality that is not historically determined and which accompanies man more or less eternally. (83)

Perhaps this best describes the bigger game Coetzee is after.

Kundera concludes his essay with this thought-provoking

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[13]In saying that the idea of gardening is the only idea that emerges from the novel, one is not saying that the idea isn't meaningful. Gordimer, after all, titles her review of Life and Times of Michael K "The Idea of Gardening" and ends the review with a moving commentary on the significance of the idea itself. "Beyond all creeds and moralities," she writes, "this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her. . . . Hope is a seed. That's all. That's everything. It's better to live on your knees, planting something . . . ?"(6).

interpretation of Kafka's novelistic power:

> the enormous social, political and 'prophetic' import of Kafka's novels lies precisely in their 'uncommittedness,' that is to say in their total autonomy from all political programmes, ideological concepts and futurological prognoses. (90)

It is because of that autonomy, writes Kundera, that Kafka "has told us things about our human condition (as it reveals itself in our age) which no sociological or political reflection will ever be able to tell" (93).

Kundera speaks in his essay of certain tendencies in modern history which produce the Kafkaesque in "the broader dimensions of societies." These tendencies can be democratic as well as totalitarian: what they both produce, in different concentrations, is bureaucratization and dehumanization. The bureaucratization of social activity to the point where institutions are transformed into "unending labyrinths" is backgrounded, to some extent, in Life and Times of Michael K. K's efforts to secure a travel permit are futile in face of the system which insists "if the permit is granted the permit will come!"(26). But more evident in the novel is the second aspect of the Kafkaesque: the dehumanization of the individual. This is revealed in many ways, but is perhaps most dramatically realized through Michael K's need to burrow

underground, to live like a beast, in order to protect his privacy.

Michael K builds his burrow to create a world different from the one he has lived in. He hopes to create a world where peace, privacy and self-sufficiency can flourish. A special allegorical meaning can be drawn from Michael K's act of construction: he is building the "house" he could never build, possess or occupy in his society; it is a dwelling in which he can relish his kind of food, grown from the earth and tended by him; and it is a place in which he can enjoy the activity he is good at, gardening.

The architect of Kafka's burrow is an animal who speaks human language and has a consciousness more elevated and paranoid than Michael K's. His burrow was also built to create a world of peace and solitude, different from the world outside it. The result of intense intellectual as well as physical labour, this burrow is a fortress. However, no sooner has the burrower constructed a fortress than he becomes preoccupied with defending it. "Despite all my vigilance, may I not be attacked from some quite unexpected quarter?", he asks. And sure enough, he becomes obsessed with thoughts of "the enemy" burrowing towards him in his inmost chamber. The peace the burrower was striving for is rendered impossible. His "no-exit" situation is supported by the relentless dialectics driving the story. Thus, as Ramon Mendoza has put it

> the peace-seeking 'dweller' becomes the wary 'guardian' of his dwelling; the life-saving hole, the dead-end of supreme danger; the epicurean sensualist, a tormented victim; the central hall of exquisite delicacies, a gruesome chamber of torture, and the great hunter, a hounded quarry. The much dreaded and avoided 'other-One' turns out to be inescapable;his absence, a constant threatening presence, heaven is turned into hell -- the Sartrean hell of the Other -- and an existence that is based exclusively on trying to evade the hell of the Other becomes hell itself.[14]

No less a feat of intellectual and physical labour than the animal's burrow, Michael's burrow is less hardy. But that is for a reason:

> I am not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations. What I make ought to be careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heartstrings. So that if ever they find this place or its ruins, and shake their heads and say to each other: What shiftless creatures, how little pride they took in their work! it will not matter. (138)

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[14]Ramon Mendoza, Outside Humanity: A Study of Kafka's Fiction (Boston: University Press of America, 1986), p.231.

Like Kafka's burrower, Michael K builds his home alone and there is no one to share it with him. What drives him to build the burrow in the first place is the desire not to duplicate the ways of the world above him. There is a farmhouse on the land he burrows under, the farmhouse he stayed in when he first came to Prince Albert, and there is much from it he could take to make his life in the burrow easier, but,

> he was wary of conveying the Visagies' rubbish to his home in the earth and setting himself on a trail that might lead to the re-enactment of their misfortunes. The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try and found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings at the dam. (143)

Here, perhaps more strikingly than before, we see that K's consciousness of what he is up to is quite sophisticated. Indeed, it is highly sophisticated.

At first, Michael K is not content in his burrow. When he sees the door of the farmhouse, which is normally closed, ajar, he retreats to his burrow for days, coming out only at night to tend his acre. His anxiety over the possible discovery of his hiding spot is evident in the following:

> . . .the young pumpkin leaves now seemed nothing so much as vivid green flags proclaiming his occupation of the dam . . . . He could not sleep but lay on his bed of grass beneath the oven-heat of the roof straining his ears for noises that would herald his discovery. (144)

It seems that the "other-One" can never be kept out of Michael K's burrow. He spends his days hiding from it and his nights waiting for it. What shape will it take, he wonders: will it be an off-duty policeman, a runaway soldier, or one of the Visagies come back to claim his land? Michael's fears, it turns out, are well-founded; his enemies do arrive to rape his privacy. This is unlike what happens in Kafka's story, where the "other-One" is but an impenetrable whistle, lacking in body and substance, and we are prone to view the noise as a symptom of a neurotic mind.

The difference in the burrowers' perceptions of "the other" is matched by the difference in their reasons for digging underground in the first place. We can't accuse Michael K of self-indulgence or narcissism. We can't say that he dug a burrow for the wrong reasons since his desire is only for life in its sparest form whereas the motives of Kafka's character are less clear -- we suspect him of greed and arrogance if not a diseased subjectivity.

Michael K has no "Castle Keep" stocked for the future with elaborate stores. If and when he eats, he eats a pittance.

He is not seduced by food as Kafka's character is, but is driven to starvation. Michael K experiences the peace that eludes the animal, but, one suspects, only in the delirium accompanying deprivation:

> . . . he was learning to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour . . ., but as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids . . . . he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust, all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow. (158-59)[15]

But his separate peace does not last for long. The police find Michael K and arrest him for sabotage. They don't believe his story -- "I was sleeping and you woke me, that's all" -- and presume he is keeping stores for the guerrillas. So, the man who barely knows a war is going on is locked up as an insurgent in yet another camp, this time a so-called rehabilitation camp that before the war was a racetrack.

If there is a moral to be drawn from Michael K's story

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[15]For Coetzee's compelling ideas on the history of idleness, see his essay "Idleness in South Africa" in White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 12-35.

thus far, it might be that even though he has every right to hide from "the Other," since "the Other" denies him privacy and dehumanizes him, there is nowhere to hide. To be inside the burrow is not to be completely free from the world outside. Stripped bare of everything that enhances life, living in a dirt hole in the greatest extremity, Michael K has been reduced to an animal existence. Throughout the novel, he has been animalized by others. He is referred to as a monkey, an insect, a grub, and he is likened to a dog, a cat and a parasite. What is it to dehumanize another person? It is to see him as lacking a self. It seems fitting that those who have been dehumanized, deterritorialized and disfranchised should be forced to re-direct themselves toward the earth, to things weaker, more delicate than themselves. This orientation, accompanied by a kind of infantilism, is clearly evident in Michael K's consciousness. He speaks of "the cord of tenderness" stretching from him to the patch of earth he tends. The melons he grows are "his sisters", the pumpkins, "his band of brothers." His first fruit is his "firstborn." He is a "child of the earth"; the earth is "his mother"; it forms a tie that binds him:

> So what is it, he thought, that binds me to this spot of earth as if to a home I cannot leave? We must all leave home, after all, we must all leave our mothers. Or am I such a child, such a child from such a line of children,

> that none of us can leave, but have to come back to die here with our heads upon our mothers' laps, I upon hers, she upon her mother's, and so back and back, generation upon generation? (171)

Coetzee's comment that the novel is after a bigger game can again be noted when accounting for his depiction of Michael K's situation. While it should be easy to deplore K's predicament, which is, as he himself admits, a bleak one (when he is not forced to work in camps, he is holed up in a burrow, feeding on pumpkin and drifting in and out of consciousness), the fact is that the negativity of his situation (particularly when considered against the barbarism surrounding it) is projected positively. Michael K's retreat from History to cultivate his own garden, an activity undertaken, in part, by his desire to look after his mother, can also be understood as a creative, radical attempt to maintain innocence and to assert his own history.

The first section of the novel has dealt largely with an individual consciousness in isolation -- an isolation that is, to some extent, self-imposed, but that is also intensified by K's position in society. We can assume Michael K's isolation is, in part, due to his class because of the place in which he lives and because of the nature of his interactions with others. Many of these interactions are characterized by

domination or enslavement and typically end up, as we have seen, with K being imprisoned and forced into some kind of labour.

The second section of the novel is set in the rehabilitation camp, the third camp Michael K finds himself in, and is focused on the Doctor's response to Michael K. Through the Doctor, we get the strongest sense of the ambivalent response Michael K provokes in others. For although the Doctor is appalled by "Michaels'" (the name, it seems, officals insist on calling him by) physical condition and bare existence, he is nevertheless drawn to view him as a harbourer of some great truth, as a kind of messiah. And while, in one mood, he dismisses "Michaels" as "a stick insect," "too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history," at the same time he is fascinated by the way K has "managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does"(207).

Of course, this seems an attractive attitude to the Doctor, who is embroiled in the destructive and dehumanizing history of the regime. And since he is employed by the regime, he is dependent on it and subject to its history. Certainly the example of someone ignoring history, but managing to escape being a victim of it, is intriguing to him. So intriguing that he, in a letter to Michael K (there is no possibility of dialogue with K; the Doctor can only "talk" to

him in a letter), reveals his desire to be a disciple. He wants Michael K to act as his "guide," to show him to the place "between camps" so that he, too, might lead a simple, decent life. But this collaborative possibility is recognized by the Doctor as foolish and unlikely just as his attempts to "know" K are treated ironically by the narrator. In his letter to his patient, who has escaped the rehab camp, the Doctor uncovers his own absurdity and the futility of his attempts to understand K's meaning:

> Would I be imagining it, or would it be true that at this point, you would begin to throw your most urgent energies into running so that it would be clear to the meanest observer that you were running to escape the man shouting at your back, the man in blue who must seem to be your persecutor, madman, bloodhound, policeman? Would it be surprising if the children, having trotted after us for the sake of entertainment, were now to begin to take your part and harry me from all sides, darting at me, throwing sticks and stones, so that I would have to stop and beat them away while shouting my last words to you as you plunged far ahead into the deepest wattle thickets, running more strongly now than one would ever expect from someone who did not eat -- 'Am I right?' I would shout. 'Have I understood you? If I am right, hold up your right hand, if I am wrong, hold up your left!'(229)

The Doctor's desire to know Michael K is like the Magistrate's desire to know the barbarian girl in another of Coetzee's novels, Waiting for the Barbarians.[16] Like the Doctor, the Magistrate is "in the cauldron" of history and is a subject of Empire. Though he recognizes the "ignorance, cunning and slovenliness" of the barbarians, the Magistrate is nonetheless obsessed with a barbarian girl, and like the Doctor with Michael K, he finds himself paying a peculiar sort of attention to her. He wants to "penetrate" her "surface" in the hope of finding in her deeper structure hints of "an old, free state." In order to discover the girl's "secrets," the Magistrate frequently talks at her, questioning and interrogating her, but to his "opaque words," she rarely answers. "You talk too much," she tells him. Like the Doctor, the Magistrate realizes the absurdity of his quest; he likens himself to an old woman reading tea-leaves, who searches for clues and answers no matter how bizarre.

The Doctor also indulges in interrogations. To him, language is clearly the only means for establishing perspective on any experience; therefore, it represents a necessary, inescapable limit that no individual can surmount. Until he meets Michael K. Fervently he urges his dumb-struck

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[16] J.M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1980). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation in parentheses.

patient to open his mouth, talk, tell his story, but what the Doctor gets in response is "a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mineshafts, bomb shelters, airless places"(191).

While there are material explanations for both the barbarian girl's and Michael K's silence -- the barbarian girl doesn't understand the Magistrate's language and Michael K's hare lip makes it awkward for him to speak -- there are also larger implications to be drawn from it. Both K and the barbarian girl seem to have decided not to speak in certain situations; specifically, when they find themselves in relations of inequality. The inequality is usually revealed in the nature of the speech that occurs in these situations. Rather than being a genuine attempt at a significant kind of communication, it is often speech characterized by commands, interrogatives, threats or coercion. It is speech devoid of mutuality. We have seen the operation of such relations accompanied by this kind of speech time and again in Life and Times of Michael K. In the first section of the novel, for instance, when the Visagie grandson returns to the farm to hide after deserting from the army, he demands K's co-operation: "You must help me. Otherwise there is no future for either of us. Do you see?"(89) K rejects the offer; he chooses to see differently and is called an idiot for it. But that is because he already understands, from the boy's domineering treatment of him, that any cooperation the boy

espouses would mean K's enslavement. As K thinks when the boy tries to "reason" with him:

> The words, whatever they stood for, accusation, threat, reprimand, seemed to K to smother him. It is nothing but a manner, he told himself: be calm. Nevertheless he felt stupidity creep over him like a fog again. He no longer knew what to do with his face. (88)

The muteness of Michael K and the barbarian girl before the Doctor and the Magistrate can be read as a manifestation of the inequality of the relations between K and the Doctor and between the girl and the Magistrate. Remember how freely the barbarian girl speaks when she is out of the Magistrate's orbit: she chats happily with the women employed by him to do the cooking and cleaning, and she trades quips with the men enlisted by the Magistrate to take her back home. After delivering the girl back to her people, the Magistrate thinks what a pity it was that he never learned her language. But there is no guarantee that that would have changed the pattern of their communication. Although the Magistrate is a much more compassionate member of the ruling class than Colonel Joll, he is still in a position of superiority over the girl, and does, to some extent, engage in a kind of coercion. And those who coerce, rule or use force over others seem to be

deprived of the possibility of real communication with or knowledge of others. For the most significant kind of knowing is that which is achieved through recognition, not through the speculation and introspection which are the Magistrate's means. As hard as he tries, he cannot conjure up the barbarian girl's face. Because he cannot recognize her, it is implied that he cannot know her.

Both K and the barbarian girl derive a considerable amount of power from their silence. In this sense, they are like Elizabeth, one of the protagonists in Ingmar Bergman's film, Persona.[17] In her discussion of the film, Susan Sontag suggests that "muteness is . . . a fact with a certain pyschic and moral weight, a fact which initiates its own kind of psychic and moral casuality upon an 'other.'"[18] It is clear how this power operates, for example, in an "exchange" between the Doctor and K. Frustrated to the point of desperation, the Doctor tries to force Michael K to talk. He struggles to convince him how easy it is to speak and how dangerous it is not to:

> Talk, Michaels . . . . You see how easy it is to talk,

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[17]The film centers on the relationship between two women, Elizabeth, a woman suffering from a kind of collapse whose symptom is muteness, and Alma, the nurse charged with caring for Elizabeth.

[18]Susan Sontag, "Bergman's Persona" in Styles of Radical Will (New York: Dell, 1970), 130.

> now talk. Listen to me, listen how easily I fill this room with words. I know people who can talk all day without getting tired, who can fill up whole worlds talking . . . . Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise, you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed . . . . You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you? Well then, talk, make your voice heard, tell your story! (192)

All the Doctor's pleading, all his words, are to no avail, for to slide through life absolutely unnoticed is precisely what Michael K desires. To do so is, in some sense, to live beyond speech, or, at least, to live beyond certain kinds of speech: not as something substantial, something heavy that would leave tracks behind it, "but if anything, as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust"(133). Or perhaps K is using his silence for another reason: to allow time for the continuation of thought?[19]

Michael K is well aware of the problem that arises when he tries to explain himself to himself:

> Always . . . there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was

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[19]Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" in Styles of Radical Will, 19. This is one of several reasons Sontag offers to explain silence.

> useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a gap in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (246)

Yet all his life others have wanted to hear his story, though it is not a story to please others. This he reflects on, among other things, in the final section of the novel which is focused through him. He has escaped the Doctor, the hospital, the camps, and is back where he began: at Sea Point, curled up like a fetus, in his mother's room. Finally, he takes comfort in the fact that he has pleased himself in avoiding the coercive urges of others:

> At least, he thought, I have not been clever and come back to Sea Point full of stories of how they beat me in the camps till I was thin as a rake and simple in the head. (248)

The last few pages of the novel have Michael K meditating on his life and trying to make some formulations based on the truth of it. The first truth he excitedly strikes upon is that he is a gardener, but this dwindles when confronted by the fact that he is living in a closet by the sea. What would a gardener be doing in such a place? He then decides that the truth of his life is "that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time"(248).

Reflecting back, Michael K figures he has made two mistakes. One was not to have had plenty of seeds, "a different packet for each pocket," and the second was that he planted his seeds in one patch. He realizes he should have planted them one at a time, spread out over miles of veld, and drawn a map so that he could make a tour of the sites at night to water them. He could have done this because the one thing he discovered out in the country was that "there is time enough for everything"(249).

To win through to the realization that there is time enough for everything takes a sophisticated sensibility, just as it takes a certain sagacity to come to the conclusion that there is no shame in being simple. Going back to simple ideas, like the idea that the earth is there to be tended, and that every season has its time, is, in some sense, like rediscovering the Garden.

To think that there is time enough for everything is to think that time is as full as it ever was. It is to transcend the time of history, of war, which is a time of waiting and of living in suspension. To think that there is time enough for everything is not to think of oneself "as a castaway marooned in a pocket of time" like the Doctor, "listening with one ear to the banal exchanges of camp life and with the other to the suprasensual whirring of the gyroscopes of the Grand Design"(217). Rather, it is to transform the time of history into the time of natural cycles. We have seen one aspect of

this in Michael K's attachment to the earth. Another aspect of his attunement to natural cycles is exposed when we see in what direction his thoughts turn when he is confronted by an official of History, the captain who conducts the search on the farm, the man who beats K and calls him a monkey. Here is what K tells himself directly after being abused:

> Every grain of this earth will be washed clean by the rain . . . and dried by the sun and scoured by the wind, before the seasons turn again. There will be not a grain left bearing my marks, just as my mother has now, after her season in the earth, been washed clean, blown about, and drawn up into leaves of grass. (171)

To think that there is time enough for everything is to respond to time as it is conveyed in that famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3, 1-8. To follow the laws of nature and to tend to the earth implies as well an interest in <u>deeper</u> relationships, relationships that take time to grow and flourish, like plants from seeds.

The final two paragraphs of the novel, in which we find Michael K telling himself a story about the future, are worth quoting in full so that we can then discuss what is being suggested by his story:

It did not seem impossible that whoever it was who disregarded the curfew and came when it suited him to sleep in this smelly corner (K imagined him as a little old man with a stoop and a bottle in his side pocket who muttered all the time into his beard, the kind of old man the police ignored) might be tired of life at the seaside and want to take a holiday in the country if he could find a guide who knew the roads. They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before; in the morning, at first light, they could go out searching the back streets for an abandoned barrow; and if they were lucky the two of them could be spinning along the high road by ten o'clock, remembering to stop on the way to buy seeds and one or two other things, avoiding Stellenbosch perhaps, which seemed to be a place of ill luck.

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself (things were gathering pace now) and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying 'What are we going to do about water?', he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft

> deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live (249-50).

Of course, some readers are bound to question the kind of life Michael K plans on living and choose to view it not as cause for admiration but for condemnation. Similarly, some might read the moral of Michael K's story -- "there is time enough for everything" -- as a definition of complacency. Those seeking a call to action in Life and Times of Michael K will undoubtedly be disappointed, for if there can be said to be a call to action, it is so quiet, and the resulting action so minimal, that one might be led to conclude that Coetzee is implying the futility of anything more substantial, given the circumstances. As well, some might object to Coetzee's depiction of an ordinary man (if Michael K is ordinary), and call it distorted. The ordinary man is not passive, they might argue, he is not willing to live like an animal if he is to survive.

To answer some of these kinds of objections, it is worth exploring in just what way Michael K imagines himself living. The first thing he imagines is a companion, someone like himself -- down on his luck, homeless, and with a desire to leave the city. The man he envisions will be inconspicuous and insignificant -- the kind of man the police will ignore. So what Michael K imagines in the future is a community of two:

vagrants, perhaps, but diverse equals nonetheless.

The trip they will take together has the air of holiday about it; K has them "spinning" along the high road. Significantly, he casts himself in a principal role -- as "guide," as someone who "knows the roads." He will take the lead and direct the course of their travel. They will avoid Stellenbosch, which seemed like a place of "ill luck." With what resilience is Michael K characterizing himself here! To press on, keeping clear of the place which by chance seemed to bring misfortune, is surely a positive action, just as the idea of community itself implies important qualities like fidelity, patience and forgiveness.

The aim of their journey is to reach the country and begin living off the land. There, we assume, they will grow food, mutually, to feed each other. To the query about water, which his companion may make, Michael K will respond with a gesture at once simple, resourceful and hopeful: he will nourish his friend as his mother nourished him, with a teaspoon. And in that way, he imagines, "one can live."

The conditional tense of the final line of the novel points to a possibility. One of the possibilities is that through creative, cooperative enterprise, a community can be founded. It need not posit a rural utopia, this idea of tending the earth, but suggests a means of achieving some personal power, independence and interdependence against a backdrop which denies individual integrity and privacy.

Another possibility suggested by the final line of the novel is this: that what is classified as shabby, derelict and insignificant by the outside can be transformed inside. For if you believe that time is full as it ever was, that there is time enough for everything, it won't matter if it takes forever to get water out of a well with a teaspoon. It won't matter if there's a war on. All that will matter is the business of living, and this, perhaps, is what it means to be ordinary.

In one sense, it seems that to be ordinary is to be in a state that transcends questions of politics, nation and race. This is the sense of ordinary that Coetzee seems to be affirming, which is surely a provocative affirmation for a "white South African writer" to be making. So it seems worth noting that Bessie Head, a Coloured writer from Botswana who died in 1986, affirms the same thing in her novel, A Question of Power.[20] Before going on to make some general connections between her novel and Coetzee's, some background to Head and A Question of Power will be provided.

As Head frankly avows, A Question of Power draws heavily on autobiographical sources: her own life shares a number of similarities with the life of her heroine, Elizabeth. Both Bessie and Elizabeth are the illegal products of an illegal

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[20]Bessie Head, A Question of Power (London: Heinemann, 1974). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation in parentheses.

affair (until recently, the Immorality Act prevented the sexual union of black and white); thus both of them are classified as Coloured. Head's origins are shared by her protagonist, the details of which Head outlines in an interview:

> I was born on the sixth of July, 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital in South Africa. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider—it the only honour South African officials ever did me -- naming me after this unknown, lovely and unpredictable woman.[21]

It is the apartheid policies of South Africa, policies which rigidly classify people on the basis of colour, that drive Elizabeth mad. "There was no escape," says Elizabeth, "from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn't any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people"(44). Like Elizabeth, Head fled South Africa for Botswana where, as a stateless person, she taught school before becoming a gardener

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[21]Charlotte Bruner, "Bessie Head: Restless in a Distant Land" in When the Drumbeat Changes. Eds. Stephen Arnold and Carolyn Parker (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1981).

in a private commune.

Elizabeth is interested in a flow of feeling from "people to people." She is suspicious of all ideologies because she sees them as a trap that would enable a few to continue their oppression of many. In response to a character who supports Black Power, for example, Elizabeth has this to say:

> I've got my concentration elsewhere . . . . It's on mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind. (133)

She pronounces as futile any exclusive grouping like Black Power because she sees it as "an urge to throttle everyone to death"(133). Her concern instead lies with ordinary people, a concern Head expands on in a letter to Charlotte Bruner in 1978:

> I am in the position of having salvaged only one value from an experience which caused suffering. That value was the word "ordinary." I want to be ordinary before I am anything else and this is tremendously important to me . . . . The opposite of that word is everything that makes people suffer. The opposite of ordinary is racialism, the sorts of people who think they are more

> than what they are, who need to live at the expense of others . . . . I refuse to co-operate with such evil. It is a pointless death-like world.

For Elizabeth, the hope for the future lies in ordinary people. From this hope, she fashions a religion which is a direct revolt against the barriers of colour: she wants to be treated as a human being. Having been singled out all her life, like Michael K, for "special" inferior treatment, she wishes only to be ordinary. The opening lines of the novel, which, in narrated time, occur after the last page of the book, assert Elizabeth's brand of faith immediately as she assesses one of the characters:

> It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an indentification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: 'I am just anyone.' (11).

And early in the novel Elizabeth is met with what seems to her to be "one of the most complete statements for the future a people could ever make," and that is: "Be ordinary. Any assumption of greatness leads to a dog-eat-dog fight and incurs massive suffering"(39). Although he doesn't articulate

it, Michael K embodies this ordinary way of life. He doesn't want to be the object of charity or abuse, he is bothered by the Doctor's attentions, and so on. Elizabeth's desire to be ordinary is like the Doctor's desire to follow Michael K and the Magistrate's desire to know the barbarian girl. At bottom, it is a desire for a simple, natural life, for a life, as the Magistrate says, "lived outside of the history that Empire imposes on its subjects." The Magistrate imagines people capable of living this way as "comrades." In the midst of a spectacle of "patriotic bloodlust" in which he finds himself implicated (Joll has brought barbarians into the courtyard to be publicly flogged), the Magistrate thinks that perhaps there are people going on with life:

> perhaps at this very minute the shoemaker is at home tapping on his last, humming to himself to drown the shouting, perhaps there are housewives shelling peas in their kitchens, telling stories to occupy their restless children, perhaps there are farmers still going calmly about the repair of the ditches. (104)

Interestingly, the idea of gardening is an attractive one to Elizabeth, Michael K and the Magistrate. In A Question of Power, for instance, those episodes which present Elizabeth's inner life are characterized by images of disease and death. Those that deal with her outer life show her in the communal

process of farming. This community-involvement acts as therapy for her. Her association with the vegetable garden brings her into contact with the "wonderful strangeness of human nature" (72). In the garden, people are like "kings and queens to each other" and there is "spirituality in everything." The co-operation of people of different races in the gardening enterprise is emblematic of the kind of society Elizabeth wishes for -- a society in which black and white work together for the mutual good of all (158).

What the beleaguered but healthy community newly-founded by the Magistrate at the end of Waiting for the Barbarians takes up is gardening. This seems a practical way to survive in an ordinary fashion and in accord with natural cycles. The flooded fields are harvested; town gardens are irrigated; and the Magistrate urges his fellow citizens "to cultivate their kitchen gardens, to plant root vegetables that withstand the winter frost" (144).

The idea of gardening is not a new idea, to be sure. It is an idea that brings to mind Voltaire's Candide, among others, who, in a different tone, reminded us to cultivate our garden. Many take Voltaire's credo, as they may take Coetzee's and Head's, as a defense of quietism or an indifference to the plight of humanity. But surely the call to cultivate our garden can be understood to mean something more positive? Perhaps it can mean that we must direct our attention to that which is in our power to improve.

The idea of being ordinary that is conveyed in these novels harks back to one of the central concerns of Orwell's "Inside the Whale" essay. Indeed, there are some parallels to be drawn between the writer's situation in South Africa at present and the writer's situation in England in the 1930's. Out of both contexts, the writer as propagandist emerges. The reason being that against oppression or the threat of fascism, many writers feel they have no choice but to be prescriptive, didactic and programmatic. Hence, Gordimer's understanding of the shape that many black South Africans' writings take and her own commitment to critical realism, along with Stephen Spender's justification of the project of "committed" writers in England in the thirties. If an allowance is made for this kind of writing, which, for all its good intentions, can sometimes seem to be more tract than art, then surely there is room for writing that takes on a variety of shapes as it keeps in touch with human emotions. Writing, as Orwell put it, that "makes you feel instead of telling you how you ought to feel." As it was for Orwell reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," so it can be a relief for many to hear an "ordinary" human voice, confused and feeble as it may be. And, as Orwell justifies Henry Miller's "non-cooperative, passive attitude," so we can justify Coetzee's, irresponsible as it may seem to some. Both writers are revealing a common humanity, and whether or not their writing is an expression of

what people ought to feel, it probably comes somewhere near to what some people do feel.

The advances to the garden in these novels can be seen to follow, more or less, a Blakean pattern, with the advance itself representing the state of organized innocence. In Blake's schema, innocence is the first state -- a state of purity, naivete and imaginative joy. It is followed by the state of experience, a state in which "the power of human nature and society to negate the enjoyment of the soul's Innocence" is realized.[22] To be a fully-rounded human being, one must learn the lessons of experience, but emerge from them into a state of organized innocence. The transition from experience to organized innocence is typically a violent one, requiring much passion and energy. With this pattern in mind, we can see how it fits the circumstances of Elizabeth and Michael K in particular.

Elizabeth and Michael K are both innocents, pitched into the world of experience (which, in their respective situations, happens to be a world of unusual suffering and deprivation), yet both of them manage to emerge from the cruelties of experience with enough heart and momentum to imagine and organize a new state -- a state characterized by co-operation and creative enterprise.

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[22]Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967), p.60.

The Magistrate, on the other hand, is an administrator for the Empire. Although he has many good impulses, his innocence is compromised by his age and his occupation. "I know somewhat too much," he admits, and in the novel preceding Life and Times of Michael K, Coetzee reveals the workings of power on a sensibility that understands them all too well. Like Noel de Witt and the Doctor, the compassionate administrators of the rehabilitation camp in Life and Times of Michael K, the Magistrate is in the double-bind of despising the regime yet finding himself inextricably bound up with it. An ironic situation, as is the Doctor's, and like the Doctor, the Magistrate is practiced in self-deprecation. As a matter of fact, his self-scrutiny is as unrelenting as Rosa Burger's, and while he may remind us of Mehring in that he is part of the machine, the Magistrate's candour and perceptiveness engage our sympathies much more than Mehring could.

Mehring, too, sought refuge from history through a connection to the land -- a desire shared by Michael K, Elizabeth and the Magistrate -- but where that desire is understood and acceptable in Elizabeth's and Michael K's case, it isn't a certainty for the Magistrate and it isn't allowed to Mehring. Mehring clearly hasn't the right character: his "innocence" is sophisticated and ruthless, cultivated to insulate him from the world outside. The Magistrate, on the other hand, has, potentially, the right kind of character, even if he is a servant of Empire and Coetzee, as W.B.J. Wood

suggests, seems to think him "a pathetic and hopeless case."[23]

Coetzee's position seems to be that despite the many admirable qualities in the Magistrate, his righteousness is always compromised. He can never be free of Empire. One of the judgements of the novel seems to be that it is too late for the Magistrates of this world. There is no ritual of expiation powerful enough to cleanse them, no state of organized innocence open to them that is not corrupted. The only true innocents are the children. The hope, if there is any, rests with them. In an interview in Kunapipi, Coetzee elaborates more fully on the plight of the Magistrate:

> There is no choice for people as old as that and as set in their ways as that. Obviously the fact that he's an old man set in his ways reflects other things. You know, hypothetically the choice would be in fact between the police and the empire and what they stand for, and the barbarian way of life. He cannot choose the barbarian way of life, although he makes vague

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[23]In an excellent article titled "Waiting for the Barbarians: Two Sides of Imperial Rule and Some Related Considerations", W.J.B. Wood argues, without denying Coetzee's distinction as a novelist, that despite Coetzee's reluctance to assert him as such, the Magistrate is an alternative to Colonel Joll. To say that the Magistrate "is the lie the Empire tells itself when times are easy" and that the Colonel "is the truth it tells when harsh winds blow" is only a partial diagnosis. Wood's thesis is a persuasive one. His article can be found in Momentum: Recent South African Writing. Eds. M.J. Daymond, J.U. Jacob and M. Lenta (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), 129-140.

> gestures in that direction, in the direction of the barbarian girl. But I'm sure you remember that there is a very strong presence of children in that book and there is no saying -- although the book doesn't directly deal with it -- what those children might do and what sort of life they might lead. They might be able to make choices that he finds impossible.[24]

Taking a cue from Coetzee, it might be worth considering the presence of children in his novel in a less psychoanalytical way than Joan Gilmer does in her essay.[25] Perhaps the most obvious thing that comes to mind from the presence of children in a work is the idea of innocence. This is an association intensified by the Romantic poets, mainly Blake and Wordsworth, who saw in the state of childhood something to be aspired to and deliberately cultivated in maturity.

Childhood is usually considered to be a state in which intuition, imagination, freedom and sensuality are pre-eminent. The time of childhood, unlike the time of adulthood, is full and merciful. To be a child, from an adult perspective, is to be free of the constraints of society and

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[24] J.M. Coetzee, interviewed by Folke Rhedin in Kunapipi, Vol 4, No 2 (Autumn 1982), 7.

[25] Joan Gillmer, "The Motif of the Damaged Child in the Work of JM Coetzee" in Momentum: Recent South African Writing, 107-119.

the knowledge of the relentlessness of time. It is a state of bliss, of the idyll, of paradise. The impulse on the part of the Romantic poets to recapture the "visionary gleam" of childhood was not simply escapist or regressive; it was, in fact, revolutionary. Behind it was a revolt against the mechanistic explanations of the world offered by Newton and Locke, and, in their place, the assertion of the importance of self, feeling and creativity.

Further, true innocence is not merely the naive innocence of childhood, but something which moves beyond the harsh lessons of experience to a state of freedom, expansion and wisdom. As Blake proverbially put it: "Unorganized Innocence: An Impossibility. Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance."[26]

In literature, the state of innocence has typically been linked to a natural setting, specifically, a pastoral setting which presents nature as serene and yielding as opposed to "red in tooth and claw." The child is "a priest of nature"; his connection to the natural world is a spiritual, commanding one.

The world of the pastoral is idyllic, usually rural and simple; thus, it is often a world conjured up when an ideal or more innocent world is felt to be lost. The dominant impulse of the pastoral is a search for simplicity that leads away

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[26]Geoffrey Keynes, ed. Poetry and Prose of William Blake (London: Bodley Head, 1939). The quotation can be found near the end of Notes written on pages of "The Four Zoas."

from a complexity represented by a specific location (the refuge typically being in a rural setting) or historical situation, or from a specific period of human existence like adulthood from which the refuge is in visions of childhood. The Magistrate is an old man, a representative of the archaic ways of Empire, who is being usurped by younger men bearing the new ways of Empire. It is not surprising, then, that, feeling trapped in the overwhelming present and unable to live life on his own terms, he should long to escape to another time. Such yearnings are everywhere in the novel and so are the children.

Burdened by the problem of how to act in a situation which he ceaselessly interrogates for its ironies and hypocrisies (the Magistrate is never free of doubt -- he can never be sure if one way of behaving is any different from another or if it is worth standing up for over another), the Magistrate seems to gravitate, without bitterness or nostalgia, toward youth and innocence in the form of the barbarian girl, his dreams of children, his love-making with flower-like young women, his contacts with the young boy who brings him food. The Magistrate offers several reasons for his orientation, but the most striking reason is this: the way they live, in directness, certainty and timelessness, is the way he wants to live:

The children never doubt that the great old trees in

> whose shade they play will stand forever, that one day they will grow to be strong like their fathers, fertile like their mothers, that they will live and prosper and raise their own children and grow old in the place where they were born. What has made it impossible to for us to live like fish in water, birds in air, like children? (133)

His answer is that Empire has made it impossible:

> Empire has created the time of history. Empire has created its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. (133)

And this is precisely the Magistrate's predicament: he is living in history while attempting to plot against it. Coetzee makes his struggle a difficult one; there aren't many alternatives open to him. He can continue archiving the past, seeking out its ruins and attempting to decipher its messages for a "special historical poignancy", but that is not going to make transcendence likely. He considers joining the fisherfolk. He thinks of building himself a hut of mud and reeds, and marrying one of their pretty daughters, but while

indulging in such "daydreams", the Magistrate is at the same time aware that these are "dreams not of how to live but of how to die" (133).

So how then does he live? As the naturally ascendant leader of a community, composed of the men, women and children left in the outpost after Mandel's departure, all of whom labour together to survive. Together they smoke fish, harvest fields, cultivate gardens and dig wells for water. And what is this new community founded on? Significantly, it is not founded on the bones of children. In choosing to dig the well away from where the bones of children lie, the Magistrate is denying the idea that civilization has to be built on the death of the child in us. Instead, it can be said that by this gesture, he is trying to establish a new kind of civilization, a civilization based on the hope of the child's continuance in us.

To want to restructure society on the basis of the survival of the child in us is to want to preserve certain qualities which make it possible to experience the present in a worthwhile way. Qualities like imagination, curiosity and sensuality, like living through the body in harmony with the mind. And the Magistrate possesses some of these qualities himself, though he is quick to denigrate them. To be susceptible to feeling and sensation as he is is surely not a matter for shame; neither is it a matter of shame to love and respond to the natural world with the force he does.

Similarly, it is not a weakness to want to understand experiences outside of the self as the Magistrate does.

To build this kind of community can also be seen as an attempt to save childhood for children. Perhaps in this community, there won't always, somewhere, be a child being beaten. Perhaps, too, children won't have to forego their innocence so brutally and abruptly. They won't have to witness public floggings or, worse, watch their own fathers being tortured. They may be fortunate enough to be indoctrinated into something other than bloodlust and violence.

It was Wordsworth who wrote that "the child is the father of man." If it is too late for the Magistrates of this world, it may not be too late for their children; if, of course, the kind of world they grow up in is different from that of their fathers. The young woman, Mai, whom the Magistrate spends time with at the novel's end, asks: "What will become of the children?" As an answer, the novel offers several possiblities. Certainly one has to wonder about the outcome of children educated in the sadism and brutality of the Empire. Will they perfect its ways or will they be provoked by them to rage and revolt? But to balance these sinister possibilities are the hopeful images of children in the Magistrate's dreams, imaginary models which attest to the children's creativity and resourcefulness: the child baking bread in the desert; and the children at the novel's end building a snowman in the

courtyard.

While it is easy to argue that the hope implied by the Magistrate's gesture of digging a well away from the bones of children is negated by many things -- among them, his dream of the poisoned well, his inability to write the memoirs of the outpost, his general pessimism, his feeling of stupidity and aimlessness at the novel's end[27] -- I would argue that despite all of these signs, the most important fact is that at the novel's end the Magistrate remains. He may be caught, as he seems to feel, in an absurd present whose keys are elsewhere, but he "presses on," and most importantly, in a way which reflects a creative capacity for life rather than an exploitative one. It is worth noting that the road the Magistrate imagines himself on is not necessarily leading "nowhere"; it "may" lead "nowhere".

We began this chapter by looking at Gordimer's review of Life and Times of Michael K. Coetzee's novel was then considered on its own terms, and in relation to some of the ideas raised in it, two other novels were discussed. Now, finally, it is to Gordimer that we can again turn to sum up generally some of the implications of Coetzee's novelistic

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[27]Some critics, Lance Olsen most notably, take these signs as signifying "the presence of absence," the futility of the Magistrate's search for "meaning", the "zero" that beats at the center of civilization, authority, humanism and truth. See his article "The Presence of Absence: Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians" in Ariel Vol. 16, No. 2, April 1985, 47-56.

techniques, at least as they are manifested in Life and Times of Michael K and Waiting for the Barbarians.

At the end of the essay, "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer briefly describes Beckett as one of those writers who sought "to transform the world by style."[28] Significantly, she says things in praise of Beckett that could just as easily apply to Coetzee; she describes the "bigger game" both authors are after. (Coetzee has, incidentally, acknowledged Beckett's influence on his work; certain similarities between the two writers in style and attitude are striking[29]). Beckett, writes Gordimer, takes on as his "essential gesture" a responsibility "direct to human destiny, and not to any local cell of humanity" (148). Through his generalized

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[28]Gordimer's assessment of writers like Flaubert, Woolf and Beckett as writers who sought "to transform the world by style" by removing themselves as far as possible from societal demand is formulaic and vague. It does not accurately sum up the achievements of the writers. However, it is not my intention really to argue with her assessment, only to show that in her assessment of Beckett, she says things in praise of him which could just as easily apply to Coetzee.

Gordimer admits that to want to transform the world by style is a possible way of being responsible, but at the same time, she insists that it cannot serve as the essential gesture in a place like South Africa (148).

[29]The most obvious similarity, to me anyway, is both authors' celebration of the ordinary. Beckett felt Descartes was only setting man up for disappointment when he suggested man should strive to be God-like. As Beckett understood it, it was hard enough striving to be an ordinary man, never mind a god. Beckett's "centaur" image of man was man on a bicycle, linked to something capable of breaking down, and given such circumstances, the best a man could do was to press on and hope for the best. The ending of Waiting for the Barbarians is particularly Beckett-like in its aimlessness softened by an element of hope.

political allegorizing, Coetzee can be said to be doing the same. Beckett is removed from the temporal, Gordimer continues, yet "makes some kind of final statement exacted by the temporal" (148). Similarly, by the relative absence of particularities of time and place in Coetzee's novels, this kind of analysis can apply to his work. Beckett "has chosen to be answerable to the twentieth century human condition", concludes Gordimer, "which has its camp everywhere or nowhere" (149). Again, what Gordimer is describing applies to a large extent to the gestures of her fellow South African, gestures which she deems as impossibilities for writers in their country, but gestures, as we have seen, that are nevertheless powerful.[30]

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[30]There are several critics who feel that Coetzee's gestures are less than essential, given their context. Michael Vaughan, for instance, has argued in detail about the deficiencies of Coetzee's modernism as a response to the South African situation. See his essay, "Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies" in Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol.9, No.1, October 1982, 119-38.

Similarly, Paul Rich questions the suitability of novels with post-modernist tendencies like Coetzee's in the South African context. See Rich's "Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee" in Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol.9, No.1, October 1982, 55-73. Both critics find fault with Coetzee's lack of historical specificity, but are most bothered by their belief that his novels are "vehicles for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals" (Rich,73). Coetzee's work might seem doomed to disappoint the Left, lacking as his novels are in populist tendencies and historical details, but Menan Du Pleiss, an activist in the United Democratic Front and a professor of linguistics at the University of Cape Town, has published a persuasive article in which she shows how Coetzee can be of interest to the Left. The title of the essay is "Towards a True Materialism," and it

Certainly the place in which both Gordimer and Coetzee write is fraught with complex problems. Along with the segregation of human beings on the basis of skin colour ("screening", as Berger defined it and as was discussed in the previous chapter, taken to its most horrific extreme), there is the screen the South African government sets up by denying journalists the freedom to report facts as they see them and by banning books whose messages might reveal too much. These are only some of the most obvious obstacles that make it difficult for writers inside to tell the stories of South Africa to the world outside. In such a situation, a writer might consider it one of his or her responsibilities to attempt to break through the screen. Gordimer has shown us one way in her commitment to critical realism and the reliance in her novels on actual history, a reliance, no doubt, which has been responsible for the fact that several of her books have been banned in South Africa.

It has been the purpose of this chapter to argue that Coetzee gives us another variation on responsibility. By their autonomy, their freedom from distinctly political programmes, Coetzee's novels can slip through the censor's net

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commemorates, after a close study of Coetzee's work, the author of the essay's "radical ideological turning." (She is a Leftist who originally felt Coetzee's work was of little interest to the Left). See her essay in Contrast: South African Quarterly, Vol.13, No.4, December 1981, 77-87.

to help remind us, his Western audience, that oppression and injustice are not limited to South Africa, that, in some sense, they are eternal. He helps remind us of this without allowing us to sink into cynicism or indifference. He helps remind us, through the different sensibilities of the Magistrate and Michael K, that human desire can be, at bottom, not the desire for some glorious transcendence, but for life in its simplest, most ordinary form.

"For God's Sake, Open Up the Universe a Little More!": The Manifold World of Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

Like Nadine Gordimer, Salman Rushdie is a writer who has written about the need for committed fiction. As he proclaimed in "Outside the Whale,"

> there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. (137)

But it is important to remember that Rushdie, while making vigorous claims for political engagement, is in a very different position from the one Gordimer and Coetzee are in. Where they are in South Africa and in the thick of things, so to speak, Rushdie is away from the centre of the events he writes about. He is an Indian living in England and writing, in Midnight's Children, about India. This may seem to make things easier for Rushdie in some ways but perhaps more difficult in others. On the one hand, he doesn't have to worry about the problem of censorship (at least, in England) but, on the other, he does have to worry (in so far as he wants to be politically engaged) about the problem as to how to make his work relevant. Whereas everything that Gordimer and Coetzee write is almost automatically thought to have a political bearing, this can hardly be the case with Rushdie's

writings. It is not surprising, therefore, if Rushdie does things in his fiction that Gordimer and Coetzee do not do. One of the main purposes of this chapter will be to examine the kinds of things unique to Rushdie and manifested in Midnight's Children.[1]

In an essay published in the London Review of Books, Rushdie deals with the various dilemmas of writers like himself who write about their homeland from a relatively safe place outside of it.[2] And while Rushdie declares in the essay that literature "can, and perhaps must, give the lie to official facts," he questions if this is the proper function of the writer who writes, in his case, from outside of India (18). He admits he may be thought of as a "dilettante" because by speaking out, his personal safety is not threatened, and similarly, he wonders what right he has to speak at all. Yet Rushdie follows through with a very simple answer: "literature is self-validating" (18). What matters, in other words, is that a book's merit is not determined by its author's worthiness to write it, but "by the quality of

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[1]Salman Rushdie, Midnight's Children (London: Pan Books, 1982). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation in parentheses.

[2]Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands" in London Review of Books, 4:18, 20 October, 1982, 18-19. He includes exiles, ex-patriates and emigrants in his list of writers experiencing this dilemma.

what has been done."[3] There have been "terrible" books, writes Rushdie, that "arise directly out of experience, and extraordinary imaginative feats dealing with themes which the author has been obliged to approach from the outside"(18). He offers William Styron's Sophie's Choice as an example of the latter.[4] He then asserts that "literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups." The real risks for any artist, he maintains, are taken

> in the work, in pushing the work to the limits of what is possible, in the attempt to increase the sum of what it is possible to think. Books become good when they go to this edge and risk falling over it -- when they endanger the artist by reason of what he has, or has not, artistically dared. (18)

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[3]We might be reminded here of Gordimer's discussion in "The Essential Gesture" of the issue of white writers writing about black characters and/or "stealing" black material. Her response to this issue is similar to Rushdie's response to the dilemma of the ex-patriate writer. It is not the worthiness of the author, her colour in this case, that determines whether or not she can write about "black" characters and "black" situations, it is her "ability to do so." And the development of that ability is a measure of her responsibility towards those whose lives and situations she is portraying.

[4]This pronouncement of Rushdie's seems to challenge Orwell's understanding of the necessary precondition for "emotional sincerity." For Orwell, a good writer writes of what he knows and feels, and must be true to individual experience. But as Rushdie indicates in Styron's case, there are some subjects, like the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, that, if imagined with integrity and understanding, can be written from the outside.

But Rushdie doesn't only justify his right to write about India from the position of an expatriate: he also suggests that a writer who straddles two cultures may have a certain advantage. It is an "ambiguous and shifting ground," he notes, "but not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy"(19).[5] Because, he reasons,

> if literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then . . . our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles." (19)

Before turning to explore the angle at which Rushdie enters reality in Midnight's Children, let us look at his relationship to Gunter Grass, a novelist to whom he has been compared and with whom he shares certain tendencies.

Both Rushdie and Grass are considered political novelists. Both have taken the public road in their statements and writings outside their novels, and both of them display magic realist tendencies in their fiction. Their similarities seem to arise from the fact that both men believe, as we shall see

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[5]Nadine Gordimer and George Orwell would probably disagree. Orwell, at least in "Inside the Whale," and in reference to Miller's Tropic of Cancer, described being an expatriate as the most damaging to a novelist because it means "transferring your roots into shallower soil," and because its effect is to take the novelist "out of contact with working life and narrow down his range to the street, the cafe, the church, the brothel and the studio"(543).

later on, that there are various levels of reality and that one of the problems with the world is that many people don't accept or perhaps recognize this. The perception of various levels of reality seems to come naturally to writers like Rushdie and Grass -- migrants, who are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders, both in the societies they live in and in those societies they write about.[6]

In an article in Granta, Rushdie speaks of Grass in terms of what he calls "a migrant's vision," which manifests itself in both Grass's (and Rushdie's) novels as a combination of fiction and non-fiction.[7] Migrants, Rushdie argues, typically suffer a "triple" disruption. They lose their place, their language and their belief in social norms. And these disruptions make the migrant an important figure because, Rushdie continues, "roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being"(181-82). If someone is denied all or any of these things, he is, according to Rushdie, "obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being

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[6]Rushdie was born in Bombay and spent most of his childhood there before moving with his family to Pakistan. He then went to England, where he attended King's College in Cambridge. He now lives in London. Gunter Grass is from Danzig (which is now Gdansk, Poland). The fact that the Germans lost the war made him lose his hometown. He spent many years in Paris before migrating to West Berlin.

[7]Salman Rushdie, "On Gunter Grass" in Granta 15 (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 179-185. It is worth noting that this essay was reprinted as the Introduction to a collection of Grass's essays. Also, David Edgar's review of Rushdie's novel, Shame, is titled "The Migrant's Vision."

human"(182). The triple disruption of reality teaches migrants three things:

> that reality is an artefact, that it does not exist until it is made, and that, like any other artefact, it can be made well or badly, and that it also, of course, can be unmade. (183)

A writer who understands the "artificial nature" of reality, says Rushdie, is "more or less obliged" to enter the process of "making it," and to enter into arguments over what constitutes reality is to be at once "creative and political". Observations like these may help us understand some of the unusual ways in which both Rushdie and Grass conceive of their relationship to the reality they write about.

In a published conversation with Grass, Rushdie discusses, among other things, the idea that "fictions are lies that tell the truth," an idea that can give us some insight into both novelists' fictional practices.[8] But first, we might want to consider what Grass means when he says "fictions are lies that tell the truth." He seems to be making use of what has probably become something of a convention -- the notion that fictions are invented, imaginary and in that sense are "lies," and yet, that they can also articulate a nourishing kind of

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[8]Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass, "In Conversation" in The Listener, 113:2915, June 27, 1985, 14-15.

truth, a "transcendent" truth that cannot be materially realized -- in order to come up with a challenging paradox. But the paradox, in our present day, at least, is no longer that challenging and, moreover, perhaps not that appropriate to use in conjunction with politically committed fiction. Generally speaking, though, what Grass and Rushdie seem to be implying by this formula is that fiction has always told us something about ourselves by telling us about others, and so it is possible that it may also tell us something about the real by way of the imaginary.[9]

Rushdie agrees with Grass's contention that "dreams, the unspoken things and the fantastic ideas people have," all belong to reality. Like Grass, Rushdie admits to having been very much influenced by fairytales as a child and as a result he says he finds it difficult as a writer to obey the rules of mimesis, naturalism or of social realism that he feels tend to govern Western assumptions of what the novel should be (15). Both Rushdie and Grass believe that using "fairytale" elements brings one to another kind of truth: to, as Grass says, "a much, much richer truth than you can get by collecting facts of this flat realism"(15). By "flat realism," I would guess that Grass is referring to a kind of journalistic writing that communicates experience in a truncated fashion and thereby

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[9]The small summary that precedes their conversation perhaps more clearly articulates what both authors mean by "fictions are lies that tell the truth." It suggests, simply, that there are truths (about history and politics in particular) fiction can reach that other kinds of writing can't.

reduces it to a number of facts and statistics. Against this "flat realism," both he and Rushdie pit the story, the kind of story that brims with fairytale elements and the richness of experience.

If we now return for a moment to "Outside the Whale," we will recall that Rushdie began his essay by railing against the rise of "Raj revisionism." Specifically, he was decrying the depiction of India and Indians by British authors, film-makers and TV producers. The form of these revisionist enterprises was cast, he maintained, in such a way that Indians were relegated to bit-parts in their own history, and the stories that seemed to matter were the stories of the British. And the moral of this would seem to be that an Indian should write about India.[10] And of course, many have, but not in the way in which Rushdie writes about India.[11] His Midnight's Children, which tries to capture, through "a pool

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[10]Rushdie does not exactly say this in his essay, but Anita Desai does in her discussion of the Raj, Rushdie and reactions to "Outside the Whale."

[11]G. V. Desani's All About H. Hatterr (1948) is an exception which Rushdie duly notes (see Kunapipi, Vol.4, No. 1, 1982, 19). Kaiser Haq in "Salman Rushdie and the Rise of the Indo-Anglian Novel" in Form: A Magazine of the Arts, No.1, 1982, 1-25 also notes the unique space Desani's novel occupies in the history of Indo-Anglian fiction while Maria Couto's "Midnight's Children and Parents: the Search for Indo-British Identity" in Encounter, February 1982 discusses the intertextual relationship between Rushdie's novel and Desani's. According to Rushdie, one of the main things All About Hatterr showed him was "the importance of punctuating badly." By punctuating in a peculiar way, like Desani, Rushdie was able to destroy the natural rhythms of English and "let other things into it."

of Anglepoised light," the history and people of India from a bit before Independence up to the Emergency (as remembered by his narrator, Saleem), can, by Rushdie's own admission, be understood as a new way to write about India and Indians, different from the earlier ways in which India had been written about by both English and Indians.[12] We can now consider what it is about Rushdie's novel that makes it a "new" way to write about India and Indians.

While Rushdie was not prescriptive in "Outside the Whale" over the matter of what form committed writing should take, it nevertheless seemed to him imperative that literature enter into arguments about what constituted reality. For the modern world, he explained,

> lacks not only hiding places, but certainties. There is no consensus about reality between, for example, the nations of the North and of the South. What President Reagan says is happening in Central America differs so radically from, say, the Sandinista version that there is almost no common ground. . . . If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications. (137)

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[12]Jean-Pierre Durix and others. An interview with Salman Rushdie, recorded in Gothenburg, Sweden, September 1982. Published in Kunapipi, Vol.4, No.1, 1982, 19.

Now, to say that the task of committed fiction is to make pictures of the world and to enter into arguments over what constitutes reality might carry the implication that fiction should be strictly mimetic. But we will have gathered from the discussion between Rushdie and Grass that this is certainly not the case with Rushdie's own fiction, a kind of fiction for which many claims have been made.

The most frequently made claim about Rushdie's fiction is that it is written in the mode of magic realism. My own view is that while there are indeed elements of magic realism in Midnight's Children, there are also enough variations on the mode to render problematic any strict application of a theory of it to the text. Still, it will be useful to describe generally the characteristics of magic realism, and to show how Rushdie adheres to and varies from the mode. Some consideration will be given to the political implications of magic realism as well as to Rushdie's opinion of the effects of the "magic" in his novel before moving on to discuss other important techniques operating in Midnight's Children.

Rushdie has been identified most often by critics as a magical realist, and has been put in the company of other practitioners of the mode like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Gunter Grass.[13] Malcolm Bradbury, for instance, has claimed

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[13]In an unpublished manuscript titled "Salman Rushdie and the Psuedo-Historical Novel," Patricia Merivale of the University of British Columbia discusses the similarities among Rushdie's Midnight's Children, Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude and Grass's The Tin Drum. Rushdie reveals

that "Rushdie shows us [in Shame] with what fantasy our sort of history must now be written -- if, that is, we are to penetrate it, and perhaps even save it."[14] And Bill Buford, a reviewer of Midnight's Children, claims that it is "a new kind of fiction of the highest order: magical, artistic, urgently political."[15] Claims such as these prompt a number of questions. For example, we can ask just what is magic realism. Can the various statements made about it be reconciled with the various claims made by Rushdie and Grass regarding their fictional techniques? What does the "magic" of magic realism consist of? How is magic realism political? Is it in magic realism, as so many critics claim, that Rushdie's strengths are to be found?

Magic realism has proved to be a perplexing concept for literary theorists, and one that seems to have resisted any rigid definition. Part of the confusion surrounding it, at least in literary circles, has been generated by the fact that the term has been applied to several media -- art, film and literature -- in different "moments" in history, and it hasn't until recently been clearly distinguished from similar modes

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his admiration for Marquez in a review of Marquez's Chronicle of a Death Foretold. The review is titled "Angel Gabriel," and it appeared in the London Review of Books, 4:17, 16 September-6 October 1982, 3-5.

[14]See his review, "Rushdie's Modern History" in The Guardian, Sept. 18, 1983, p.22.

[15]See Bill Buford's review, "Swallowing the Whole World" in The New Statesman, May 1981, pp.21-22.

like fantasy. It is not the purpose of this discussion to make any significant contribution to the debate over the concept of magic realism (there have, after all, been numerous books and articles written on the subject), but only to isolate those characteristics that will help us to examine Rushdie's text.

Because she clearly defines and isolates some of the characteristics of magic realism, I have drawn on Amaryll Chanady's study of the differences between magic realism and the fantastic for the following summary.[16] According to Chanady, there are three characteristics that distinguish magical realism from neighbouring modes. One, there exists in a text two perspectives, one real or rational, and one imaginary or supernatural. Two, both perspectives are presented in the same tone, that is, the imaginary is not considered strange, bizarre or irrational. It is separate from but equal to the rational perspective. Three, there must be a certain amount of authorial reticence in regard to the situations, both real and magical, that the narrator describes in order that readers accept the unconventional.

The first two characteristics can certainly be found in Midnight's Children. The novel is grounded in a recognizable reality -- the city of Bombay, for instance, complete with automobiles, beggars and bicycles, peopled with families who

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[16]Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, Magic Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antimony (London and New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

live in houses and sit on furniture, who have children who pick fights and drink fizzy drinks, is vividly rendered.[17] Alongside this realistic mode, there is the supernatural or magical mode -- the mode in which a woman can sew her malice into clothes or cook guilt into chutney, in which a nose is capable of making moral judgements, and a bomb can drop on only the members of the protagonist's family. A mode in which, at the moment of India's independence, everything can become saffron and green, including people's eyes and limbs, and, at the same moment, 581 children can be born with extraordinary powers like the ability to blind people with beauty, to change sex by immersion in water, to inflict wounds with words, and to eat metal. Moreover, the supernatural element is not considered problematic or explained away in Rushdie's text. The information that the narrator's son is born with elephant ears, for example, is given very matter-of-factly, as if it did not contradict the laws of reason.

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[17]Rushdie attributes the invention of this technique, of securing the background of the book firmly in reality, to Dickens. As Rushdie says in an interview in The Literary Criterion, Dickens "uses a kind of background or setting for his works which is completely naturalistic, down to the tiniest details. And on top of this completely naturalistic background he imposes totally surrealistic images - like the Circumlocution office, which is a civil service department designed to do nothing, or like many of the characters, who are much larger than life. Because they are so precisely rooted in a recognisable real world the fantasy works"(20). What Rushdie tried to do, though not quite in the Dickensian way, was to make sure the background of his novel was "recognisably correct." Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, "Interview with Salman Rushdie" in The Literary Critierion, Vol.18, No.3, 1983, 19-22.

Where Rushdie strays from Chanady's definition of magic realism is in respect to the third characteristic: authorial reticence. Saleem is not exactly the model of reticence and this is for specific reasons. First, he has to deal with Padma's demands. She is a skeptic, hungry for linearity and "facts," and Saleem has to convince her while telling his story to her that stranger things have been known to happen in their country than, say, the freezing of Aadam Aziz's testicles upon discovering that his assets have been frozen by the government. As he advises his doubtful listener, just look in the newspapers: in India, human eccentricity is the norm. Idiosyncrasy is life.

Another explanation for Saleem's narratorial intrusion lies in the fact that he is telling a story from an "alien" perspective. At least to most Western readers, it is an alien perspective. Interestingly, Westerners have often referred to Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude as a fantasy whereas South Americans seldom mention that aspect of the novel.[18] Similarly, many Indian readers of Midnight's Children have complimented Rushdie on how "real" his novel is; there, his

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[18]Marquez has repeatedly told critics he's a social realist. In The Paris Review, he told Peter Stone that "it always amuses me that the highest praise for my work comes for the imagination, while the truth is that there's not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality. The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination." See "The Sweet Plague of Love" (a review of Marquez's most recent novel, Love in the Time of Cholera) in Newsweek, April 25, 1988, 60-61.

story is not treated as fantasy.[19] It is not, to put it another way, understood as being purely bizarre, exotic or other-worldly. This dramatic difference in perception between insiders and outsiders underlines the problem of how we, the outsiders, construct and recognise that which is "other".[20] Further, it raises the additional point that what is considered normative in one culture is often understood as aberrant by members of another culture. By way of his narratorial intrusions, Saleem seems to be anticipating either that his readers do not have knowledge of the culture he is

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[19]Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, "Interview with Salman Rushdie." Rushdie also makes the point in this interview that "magic realism" is realism. The fact that Western critics mistake the mode for fantasy or apoliticism seems to him to be the result of their lack of knowledge of the South American and Indian societies.

[20]It also might make a more significant point, like the one Stephen Slemon makes in "Cultural Alterity and Colonial Discourse," a review of the proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1984. As an example of the way in which the "Eurocentric world-view" underlies "social practices and discourses that inform the ways in which we recognise and conceptualise cultural difference," Slemon points to "the industry which oversees the translation into English of literary works from South America and the Caribbean." He suggests that this industry tends to favour "magic realist" or "allegorical" texts "at the expense of those works written in a more realistic mode." The result, according to Slemon, is that this practice "promulgates a distorted perspective within which distant cultures become purely exotic, sites of the bizarre or fantastic: not because of a profound sense of cultural uniqueness such as Alejo Carpentier wanted to articulate for the Caribbean, but by virtue of a unifying metropolitan gaze that transforms the 'periphery' into a repository of a 'universal' unconscious, a homogenous realm of wonders and marvels that lie latent in 'the human condition' but have been buried by civilisation in its more advanced forms"(102). Southern Review, Vol.20, Number 1, March 1987, 102-107.

writing about, or that they may be suspicious of the magical elements composing his narrative. Hence, his intrusions, while certainly not suppressing cultural difference for the sake of Western digestion or apologizing for an unorthodox story-telling style, do occasionally serve to provide enough information to persuade a diverse community of readers to at least give ear to his unusual story.

Saleem, the character who has adopted the unusual perspective, feels the need regularly to explain the many uncanny occurrences in his story, but his explanations, far from making the uncanny appear merely bizarre, serve to naturalize it. For instance, when he is describing the various powers of midnight's children, he interjects with this comment:

> To anyone whose personal cast of mind is too inflexible to accept these facts, I have this to say. That's how it was; there can be no retreat from the truth. I shall just have to shoulder the burden of the doubter's disbelief. (196-97)

He continues by insisting that the kinds of things he is talking about happen in India:

> . . . no literate person in this India of ours can be wholly immune from the type of information I am in the

> process of unveiling -- no reader of our national press can have failed to come across a series of-- admittedly lesser -- magic children and assorted freaks. Only last week there was that Bengali boy who announced himself as the reincarnation of Rabindranath Tagore and began to extemporize verses of remarkable quality, to the amazement of his parents; and I can myself remember children with two heads (sometimes one human, one animal), and other curious features such as bullock's horns. (197)

Anyone familiar with the stuff of North American tabloids, which, incidentally, have an enormous readership, should understand what Saleem is getting at here.[21]

But many of Saleem's interruptions, far from making us accepting and complacent about the events he is presenting, serve to provoke and focus our thought on the events. In this way, they resemble Brechtian interruptions.[22] Central to

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[21]Here, for instance, are a few sample titles from that infamous American tabloid, The National Inquirer: "Woman Handcuffed to Husband for Ten Years ... but still can't stop his cheating"; "Eighty-Five Year Old Woman Impregnated by Alien . . . says she'll keep baby"; "Child Kept in Isolation for Five Years . . . thought family dog was his father." By drawing this analogy, I do not mean to put Rushdie's art on the level of the tabloids. But I am pointing out that certain elements of Rushdie's fiction appeal to or satisfy our lust for the sensational and outrageous as do the tabloids.

[22]Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?"(second version) in Understanding Brecht. Translated by Anna Bostock. (London: NLB, 1973), pp. 15-22.

Brecht's theory of epic theatre was the notion of interruption (18). By interrupting the action, Brecht sought to stir the viewer into an active, critical attitude towards the work of art rather than a passive, absorbing attitude. He was interested in enforcing the audience's alienation, not their identification, because through alienation, he hoped he could effect in them a rational distance which would compell them to make judgements about art and about the facets of life serving as the drama's content. In theory, then, Brecht's interruptions (songs, usually) would concentrate the audience's attentions at a focal point, and would hopefully provoke thought about the events being uncovered in the play.

In the present day, of course, self-consciousness, the drawing of attention to the artificiality of the artistic project, seems cliche, but there is an important sense in which Saleem's digressions do function in the way Brecht hoped his interruptions would, and are, therefore, not merely self-reflexive techniques indulged in for the sake of fashion or for the fun of it (although the effect of them is most often comic). For instance, following his re-telling of the amazing story of Mian Hummingbird's assassination, Saleem interrupts in a way that places the responsibility on the reader, if she is skeptical of the story, to root out the source of it for herself:

> Dogs? Assassins? . . . If you don't believe me,

check. Find out about Mian and his Convocations.' Discover how we've swept his story under the carpet . . . . (48)

Most often, however, the effect of Saleem's interruptions function in the reverse manner of Brecht's. Where Brecht hoped his interruptions would make ordinary events seem strange and would therefore provoke astonishment in the members of the audience in the hope that they would cease to regard ordinary events as natural and acceptable, Saleem's interruptions generally function to make extraordinary events seem probable. He attempts to deflate our astonishment in the hope that we can then regard these events as worthy of our laughter and attention if not our acceptance. For example, here is how Saleem explains what happened to Mary Pereira after she confessed to swapping the name-tags on baby Saleem and Shiva:

> . . . Ask: did daughter and old mother go into the streets to seek forgiveness? Was that not the one time in each ten years when the mummified corpse of St. Francis Xavier . . . is taken from its vault in the Cathedral of Bom Jesus and carried around the town? Did Mary and old distraught Mrs. Pereira find themselves pressing up against the catafalque; was the old lady beside herself with grief for her daughter's

> crime? Did old Mrs. Pereira, shouting, 'Hai! Ai-hai! Ai-hai-hai!', clamber up on to the bier to kiss the foot of the Holy One? Amidst uncountable crowds, did Mrs. Periera enter a holy frenzy? Ask! Did she or didn't she, in the clutches of her wild spirit, place her lips around the big toe on St. Francis's left foot? Ask for yourself: did Mary's mother bite the toe right off? (281)

Interestingly, many of Saleem's interruptions are cast in this kind of questioning, challenging format, a rhetorical strategy that is as attention-grabbing as it is frantic. But more than this, what Saleem's interruptions are, characteristically, is humorous. This was what Brecht's interruptions were to be also, for, as Walter Benjamin notes in reference to the "lavish" use of humour in Brecht's epic theatre, "there is no better starting point for thought than laughter."[23] This claim as it relates to Rushdie will be discussed further on in the chapter in connection with Rushdie's own definition of his "magical" technique. But we must now turn to consider some of the political implications of the magic realist mode.

What seems to be emphasized in the magic realist mode is the notion of plurality. Room is created in the text for alternative perspectives. By confronting "flat realism" with

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[23]Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" in Understanding Brecht, p. 101.

an image of abundance, vitality and complexity, a magic realist novel can be understood to be "expanding" reality. It can at its best provide a new angle from which to understand the world by its inclusion of the additional element that certain modes tend to ignore. Characteristics like these can help us understand the political implications of the magical realist mode, which, by its very nature, challenges objective reality by creating space for the existence of other realities.

In a recent article, Stephen Slemon extends the political implications of magic realism by discussing the possibility of reading it as "post-colonial discourse," as a kind of "counter-discourse" which sets up an opposition to "the colonial codes of representation" and acts as a "positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history."[24] Such an understanding of magic realism would be in line with Rushdie's project, I think, for he is clearly concerned, as was evidenced in "Outside the Whale," with the problems created by a lack of sensitivity towards native history.[25] The discourse Rushdie can be seen to be countering through Midnight's Children is that discourse underlying the projects

[24]Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," Canadian Literature, No.116 (Spring 1988): 9-24.

[25]As it would be in line with Grass's project in The Tin Drum, I think, which was in part an attempt to reconstruct the German language by ridding it of the poison that infected it in the Nazi period.

of those "Raj revivalists" he took to task in the essay. His history of India is told from the perspective of an Indian. Indians are the lead characters in this, their own history, and thus, the stories that matter are the stories of Indians.

In Midnight's Children, Rushdie is interested in telling the story of a nation newly-emerged from colonialism and he is interested in telling this history, a history that had first been suppressed by the presence of colonizers, and then had been altered by Indian politicians of independent India, in a way that rescues from obscurity those "things inside" mentioned by Grass to be as important as the things of "flat" reality.[26] His narrator's history, he knows, is just one of many versions of India, a version quite different from the "official" version, but, as far as he is concerned, no less real.

Saleem, one could say, is in the process of "re-visioning" history; he is imaginatively reconstructing it by recuperating the events and people overlooked by "colonialism's centralising structures" (Slemon, 22). He is "remembering" history in all the imperfections characteristic of fallible memory, and in a country like the one he lives in, which takes reality into its own hands and alters it, the writing of a novel of memory, like his, becomes a political

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[26]By those "things inside" Grass means the dreams, the unspoken beliefs and the fantastic ideas people have.

act.[27] Slemon's suggestion that magic realism can be read as a "dialogue with official history" is an interesting one when applied to Midnight's Children, for time and again we see in Rushdie's text "the counterculture of the imagination" coming into play with what Slemon calls "the inherited modes of colonial cognition."[28]

The pictures of the world Saleem is creating, through the "truth" of memory, rival those created by politicians, and, he writes, they are "as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say, except what we were officially told"(335). For instance, he tells the story of the Rann of Kutch dispute between Pakistan and India in his ghostly way because the actual fact of the dispute lies, he writes, like everything else, "concealed beneath the doubly hazy air of unreality and make-believe which affected . . . all events in the phantasmagoric Rann"(335).

One of the sources of Saleem's magic, then, appears to lie

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[27]Kundera's point - that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting - is relevant here.

[28]It should be made clear here what Slemon means by "post-colonial." He uses the term in a discursive sense, not in a cultural, historical sense. It is something, for example, that can be found in colonial times. That is, a post-colonial text can be written in a colonial situation, speaking in the historical sense. A post-colonial discourse as Slemon defines it is a counter-discourse. It situates itself as the "other" speaking and sets up an oppositional discourse within "colonial" codes of representation. (I assume that Slemon refers here to "colonial" in its discursive sense, as well). Most of these comments were gleaned from a paper Slemon gave at The University of Alberta in March, 1988. The paper was on allegory and counter-discourse.

in the fact that he has decided that in the sub-continent, reality has become difficult to locate. The political damage done to reality has made it impossible to determine the truth, hence, the only assumption that it seems safe to make is that people are being lied to all the time.[29] The difficult problem of how to comprehend, represent and make plausible an elusory reality is reflected in a technique that allows the writer to fuse history, fantasy, politics, myth, melodrama and more without much constraint.

Since Saleem's ambition is to "swallow the lot," to encapsulate the "whole" of reality in his story, it is fitting that he is a magical realist. Through such a technique, he can adopt the kind of large-scale, collective perspective necessary for incorporating an abundance of experiences. At least three other artist figures in Midnight's Children display his desire to encapsulate "the whole of reality," a fact that makes Saleem wonder if this isn't an "Indian disease" (75). There is Nadir Khan's room-mate, the painter whose paintings got larger and larger as he tried to get "the whole of life into his art" (48). Before he killed himself (suicide was also the fate of Uncle Hanif, who tried but

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[29]For instance, the air of uncertainty and unreality surrounding events of the Indo-Pakistani war, according to Saleem, was largely created by the media. Primarily, there were the vastly different reports on the war given by the two nations' radio stations: "In the first five days of the war Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India ever possessed; in eight days, All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man"(339).

failed to get his version of reality into films), the painter said, "Look at me, I wanted to be a miniaturist and I've got elephantiasis instead!"(48) Then there is the peepshow artist, Lifafa Das, who outdid his competitors (who promised their viewers only Delhi) by promising his viewers that they could see "the whole world." However, as Saleem notes, Das's "hyperbolic formula began, after a time, to prey upon his mind; more and more picture postcards went into his peepshow as he tried, desperately, to deliver what he promised, to put everything into his box" (75). Finally there is Saleem's Uncle Hanif, the social realist film-maker who wants to make a movie about the ordinary life of a pickle factory in an industry devoted to illusion and fantasy. No one will produce his script. Because he is not willing to bend his strictly mimetic vision to give the audience what they want, which, according to his starlet wife, is only a few kisses, Hanif is doomed to be without an audience. At this point, we might want to consider how Saleem's project is different from the projects of these artists, since all of them seem bothered by the question of how to contain, and then convey, reality.

In an excellent essay, Keith Wilson, among other things, distinguishes between the projects of the various artist figures in Midnight's Children.[30] Where their projects differ from Saleem's is that they attempt "full and independent

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[30]Keith Wilson, "Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility" in Critical Quarterly, Vol.26, no.3 (Autumn 1984), 23-37.

mastery" over their material (25). Their examples and outcomes prove that exercises in "complete and contained mimesis" are doomed to failure. The realities of "public history and private experience," Wilson suggests, are "never reducible to the encompassing forms that the absolutist artist may want to impose on them," hence, those artists in Midnight's Children who pursue "comprehensiveness, pure sequence, and manipulative control" are lost (26).

Yet, Saleem, too, sets himself a task equal in formidability to those tasks set by other artists in the novel. In order "to tell one life," he informs us of his technique, "you have to swallow them all." He calls himself "a swallower of lives" and indicates that there are "consumed multitudes" jostling inside of him. Readers are instructed on the opening page of the novel that if we are to know Saleem, we have to "swallow" the multitudes as well (9). This also seems a formidable task.

While Saleem's "swallowing" of lives can be understood as a metaphor by which to integrate private experience in a larger, more meaningful framework or to show that there is no such thing as privacy in India, the metaphor also raises the problem of digestion. Isn't there too much for us as readers to digest? And how much of what Saleem has swallowed has he digested?

Where Saleem's artistic project differs from the others lies in the fact that he doesn't try to digest everything that

he swallows. Sometimes the only way he can relay a difficult or painful story is simply by spitting it out. Early on in the novel, Saleem confronts directly the problems of his own fallibility, and the fact that he can't always coherently process the masses of experiences inside of him. After all, it is not only his own experiences he is trying to convey but those of his generation and his nation. He doesn't deny that it is exceedingly difficult to communicate experience in a linear, controlled fashion. Because the experiences he communicates are often fragmented, confusing and discontinuous, they are often communicated that way. As Saleem explains:

> Interruptions, nothing but interruptions! The different parts of my somewhat complicated life refuse, with a wholly unreasonable obstinacy, to stay neatly in their separate compartments. . . . and now, at the very moment when I should be describing the fabulous children of ticktock, I'm being whisked away by Frontier Mail . . . so that Aadam Aziz is getting in the way of the natural unfolding of my tale. Ah well. What can't be cured must be endured. (187)

So we as readers endure the fact that some of the experiences Saleem conveys to us are not always filtered through consciousness, reduced and therefore made less hard for us to

swallow.[31] Quite the reverse. Most often, the relentless complexity of experience steps forth undigested in Midnight's Children. But, this doesn't render the narrative meaningless, for Saleem has more success than the other artists in the novel in communicating his imperfect version of reality. After all, he has an audience and this perhaps is because he is the better story-teller. It would seem that his techniques are more appropriate for conveying the reality before him than the techniques of the painter, the film-maker and the peep-show artist.

For one of the things Rushdie has done through the creation of Saleem is to re-install the figure of the story-teller into his novel. He revives an old form of story-telling, one that emphasises the communal aspect of the artistic process and that instills in the story-teller the responsibility of remembering the past, with all the imperfections that act entails. The story-teller remembers not so much for the purposes of assimilation but for the purposes of preservation.[32] The story-teller's function, as

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[31]It is important to remember that the India that was made "easy to swallow" was the India manufactured by the Raj revivalists and criticised by both Rushdie and Desai in their essays. If something is "easy to swallow," it doesn't take much chewing. The difficulty readers might experience digesting some of Saleem's material can thus be understood as a testimony to the complexity of the substance and presentation of his material.

[32]In this sense, we can see how Rushdie fulfills Orwell's demand for "emotional sincerity." Rushdie, through the persona of Saleem, is not pretending to have absolute knowledge of the historical situation he is describing. He is

Saleem understands it, is to preserve memory against disintegration by creating a repository of the past -- his pickles of history. Significantly, one of the techniques which gives Midnight's Children its unique shape is the fact that it is modelled on the oral narrative.

In a country where only a small minority of its vast population is literate, it is not surprising that the most important literary form is one that is not written down. The most important story-tellers in India are not people who write, but people who speak. People who "tell" stories, sometimes in front of crowds of hundreds of thousands, are the literary masters.

To give some sense of the scale of importance of the oral narrative and of the idea of literature as performance in India, I include the following anecdote (which Rushdie insists is true, even though it may seem hard to believe) that Rushdie relayed in a Kunapipi interview.[33] On one of his recent visits to India, Rushdie went to hear a famous Indian story-teller give a performance in the town of Baroda, located about halfway between Bombay and New Delhi. The population of Baroda is 400,000. The number of people who gathered to hear this

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not offering us the "whole truth" but "a kind of truth" which is, to my mind, the more authentic gesture.

[33]From a lecture/interview Rushdie gave at University of Aarhus, October 7, 1983, "Midnight's Children and Shame" in Kunapipi, Vol.7, No.1, 1985, 1-19.

story-teller was 600,000. For an entire weekend, an enormous crowd of people sat in a field and listened to a man tell stories, stories which were elaborations on mythical tales, embroidered in all kinds of wonderful ways. "If ever there was a way of making a novelist feel humble," admitted Rushdie, "that was it"(7).

While listening to the story-teller, Rushdie began thinking about the shape of the oral narrative. The most striking thing about it is that it is not linear; it does not progress in a straight line from the beginning to the middle to the end of the story. It goes, as Rushdie describes it,

> in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again, sometimes summarizes itself, it frequently digresses off into something that the story-teller appears just to have thought of, then it comes back to the main thrust of the narrative. Sometimes it steps sideways and tells you about another, related story which is like the story that he's been telling you, and then it goes back to the main story. Sometimes there are Chinese boxes where there is a story inside a story inside a story inside a story, then they all come back, you see. So it's a very bizarre and pyrotechnical shape. (7)

And based on such a description, the shape of the oral narrative might also appear to be unwieldy, lacking in organization. But what Rushdie discovered was that this shape, while appearing to be "random and chaotic," was very far from being so. The wild shape developed not because story-tellers were poor organizers but because

> this shape conformed very exactly to the shape in which people liked to listen . . . in fact the first and the only rule of the story-teller is to hold his audience: if you don't hold them, they will get up and walk away. (8)

It seemed to Rushdie that this form was much more interesting than the linear narrative because it seemed designed to keep people listening more intently. The "looping and digressing and swirling shape," he thought, kept people listening as much as the content of the stories that were being told. What Rushdie set out to do in Midnight's Children, then, was to "write" a stylized version of the oral narrative:

> . . . I thought it must be possible to attempt a creation of a literary form which corresponds to the form of the oral narrative and which, with any luck,

> will succeed in holding readers, for reasons of its shape, in the same way that the oral narrative holds audiences for reasons of its shape, as well as content. (8)

Certainly the shape of Midnight's Children is as "bizarre and pyrotechnical" as that of the oral narrative Rushdie earlier described. But what gives Midnight's Children the flavour of a "told" story is the delightful Padma. Rushdie's first draft of the novel, which was at least twice as long as the revised draft, was written in the third person. Padma was a very minor character who made an appearance in only the last fifteen pages (Kunapipi interview, 24). Then, when Rushdie revised the first draft and let Saleem tell the story, Saleem, he found, "wouldn't stop talking" and Padma just "arrived and sat there, demanding to be told the story". She became very important, says Rushdie, because she demanded to be important; as well, she enabled Midnight's Children to become a story modelled on an ancient form.[34]

Of swarthy build and furry arms, named for the goddess of dung, Padma is the one to whom Saleem is telling his tale. She is his audience, a useful, heckling and critical one, he notes, and as such, she demands a certain kind of performance

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[34]The first page of the novel has Saleem likening himself to Scheherazade, the Arabian Princess who had to tell tales for 1,001 nights to Prince Shahryar in hopes that she could stave off her execution. Similarly, Saleem wants to tell his story, to end up meaning something, before he disintegrates.

from her story-teller. She makes us realize, through her demands, that it isn't only the "official" history that requires linearity and coherence if it is going to be swallowed. Aware of his responsibilites to his audience, Saleem regularly obliges her, often with hilarious results. For instance, when angered by his remarks about the origins of her name, Padma insists that Saleem "write at once that you are wrong, completely." Saleem accordingly inserts "a brief paean to Dung" to pacify his "lotus":

> Dung, that fertilizes and causes the crops to grow! Dung, which is patted into thin chapati-like cakes when still fresh and moist, and is sold to the village builders, who use it to secure and strengthen the walls of kachcha buildings made of mud! Dung, whose arrival from the nether end of cattle goes a long way towards explaining their divine and sacred status! Oh yes, I was wrong, I admit I was prejudiced, no doubt because its unfortunate odours do have a way of offending my sensitive nose - how wonderful, how ineffably lovely it must be to be named for the Purveyor of Dung! (32)

We earlier saw how Padma, in her role as incredulous listener, enables Saleem to "naturalize" some of the more bizarre events he is relating. By convincing her of their

veracity, Saleem can incorporate the "magical" elements into his narrative without stigmatizing them.

But Saleem's relationship with Padma is more significant than that. She is crucial to his very enterprise, for it is her audience which gives his narrative meaning. It is Padma who serves as Saleem's connection to the present. She works at his pickle-factory and is his companion; she sticks by him while he "cracks" and "leaks" and writes his life and times. But he can't be much more than a companion to her because he has been "unmanned," he confesses early in the story. His "other pencil" won't work no matter what Padma tries. He can't "leak" into her but she leaks into him. Her demands for simple logic and linearity have to be considered, so time and again we see Saleem bowing to what he calls the "ineluctable Padma-pressures of what-happened-nextism"(39). For instance, in the midst of the very long story winding up to his birth, he is interrupted by Padma

> bullying me back into the world of the linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next: 'At this rate,' Padma complains, 'you'll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell about your birth.' She is affecting nonchalance . . . but doesn't fool me. I know now that she is, despite all her protestations, hooked. (38)

And while Saleem gets exasperated by the demands of his "naive" reader, the fact is, he cannot perform without her. Neither can he rest on the presumption that, as story-teller, he can do whatever he likes with a "hooked" audience. She is the "base" of his "isosceles triangle," and when she abandons him, bitter about the amount of time he spends on his "writing-shiting," his pen won't work. He loses sight of the present and can't control his subject, the past:

> But today, I feel confused. Padma has not returned . . . and in her absence, my certainties are falling apart. . . . Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. (164)

Upon Padma's return, Saleem's confusion dissolves. It is quite clear that for Saleem, as Keith Wilson indicates, "the activity of the artist becomes, by trial and error, relative and collaborative, not absolute and independent"(27). Precisely because he is willing to compromise with his audience, unlike his Uncle Hanif, Saleem is able to keep one.

However, there is a limit to the amount of compromising Saleem will engage in to keep his reader. Against Padma's

demands for objectivity, linearity and coherence, Saleem will only pit "memory's truth," which, he says, has its "own special kind" of truth.

> It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (211)

Saleem won't lay claim to absolute knowledge of, or offer total explanations for, anything. His art has a deliberate air of uncertainty and unreliability about it. As he explains to Padma, "if you're a little uncertain of my reliability, well, a little uncertainty is no bad thing. Cocksure men do terrible deeds. Women, too" (212).[35]

It is for the above reasons that Wilson gives high praise to Rushdie's art. He recognizes that Rushdie has risked allowing "reach to exceed grasp" by attempting to communicate a "confusing . . . and contradictory experience," but, continues Wilson, in the "act of doing so, and of admitting what he is doing, Rushdie avoids performing a self-projecting

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[35]In his essay, "On Gunter Grass," Rushdie names Grass as the quintessential "artist of uncertainty," and suggests Grass's "Doubt" is a result of his migrant experience (183-84).

snake-charmer's act in which nobody else, certainly not the reader, has any stake. . . "(36). That "willingness to confront, shape and communicate the inevitable compromises of illusory fictional realism" is what makes Saleem's project different from the other artist figures in the novel and what, for Wilson, makes Midnight's Children such a "remarkable, important and heartening novel"(37).

Wilson's discussion of reader responsibility in Midnight's Children takes in, along with the issue of Padma as naive reader, the question of the implied reader of Rushdie's text. The implied reader of Midnight's Children, suggests Wilson, cannot be as naive as Padma for she must be adept at, among other things, what he calls "intertextual cross-referencing"(33). The question of the implied reader (on whom, as will be shown, Rushdie makes quite a number of demands) brings us to the third important formal characteristic of Rushdie's novel -- its international flavour, which is a result of its commitment to a mixed tradition.

Among some of the novelists to whom Rushdie has been likened, along with Grass and Marquez, are Sterne, Rabelais, Naipaul, Kundera, Irving, Celine, Cervantes.[36] To this list

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[36]Most of these names were gathered from the reviewer's blurbs on the cover of Midnight's Children. Rushdie has mentioned his other influences in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands" and in various interviews.

Rushdie himself adds Gogol, Bocaccio, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis, Dickens, and Swift as influences. Needless to say, this is quite a list, attesting to the polyglottism of the Western literary tradition to which Rushdie adheres. It is even a disarming list because it is so abundant. I have already indicated that the marvellous reality in Rushdie's fiction has associations with Marquez. The similarities between Grass's The Tin Drum and Rushdie's novel have been exhaustively discussed elsewhere. And the most obvious instance of intertextuality in Midnight's Children, one that many critics have recognized, is the allusion to Sterne's Tristram Shandy.[37]

But Rushdie doesn't stop there. Midnight's Children also draws heavily on Eastern literary traditions, the oral narrative being perhaps the most obvious one, and the legend of Ganesh, at least to Western readers, less obvious.[38] In Hindu mythology, Ganesh is the god of literature. Rushdie thought it fitting that Saleem the story-teller should have a

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[37]Like Shandy, Saleem takes a long time to get born - we are 116 pages into his story before he arrives on the scene. He is born with a gargantuan nose, which signals comedy as much as an association with shandy. Saleem tells his story his own way, as Shandy does, and, like Shandy's, it is a story full of digressions and progressions, written as conversation. And the problem both story-tellers face is that very modern one of how to reconcile life, history and narrative form into linearity.

[38]Midnight's Children and Shame lecture in Kunapipi VII:1, 1985, 8-9.

literary ancestor. As well, the legend of Ganesh is one of disputed parentage, like Saleem's. Shiva and Parvati quarrel over who the father of the child is. Shiva doesn't believe the child is his and, in a fit of anger, cuts its head off. In a mood of repentance, Shiva "looks around heaven for a head," as Rushdie puts it, and comes up with an elephant's head. That Ganesh had an elephant's head also means that he had an enormous elephant nose, a fact which makes it perfectly clear why Rushdie thought it appropriate that Ganesh stand behind Saleem. Clearly, the implied reader of Rushdie's text has to be widely read in world literature across several centuries to be aware of these varied influences.

There are other examples of mixed traditions in the text. For instance, Rushdie has his narrator born into a Muslim family, yet relying quite heavily on Hindu traditions throughout his story. Part of Rushdie's point here seems to be to underline the idea of multiplicity, that in India there are a wealth of traditions from which to draw, and to show that there is no such thing as a "pure Indian tradition." According to Rushdie, Indians have always been good at assimilating, and this is not necessarily a bad thing to be good at.

And not least, there is the vibrant language of the text itself, if it can be accurately called that, for the text teems, really, with a mixture of languages, the language of the cinema, for one, and the colourful smatterings of pidgin

English, chee-chee, Indian English and Hindi, to name a few others.[39] The various forms of English and Indian incorporated in the text mirror the incorporation of diverse linguistic influences in India, thereby reinforcing the "mixed tradition" that defines the sub-contintent. The language of cinema signals what to Saleem has to be an influence on every Bombayite, at least. Bombay is the centre of a prolific film industry, and no native of the place, Saleem asserts, should be without a basic film vocabulary. Accordingly, Saleem's story is peppered with "scenes" relayed in the language of a director or an astute movie-goer: he "cuts," for example, while spying on his mother in the Pioneer Cafe, from a "two-shot" of lovers to an "extreme close-up" of nicotine (217). Movies provide him with another way of seeing, another way of shaping reality, another angle by which to enter it.

The next step in the discussion is to consider how we are to understand these commitments to a mixed tradition. Keith Wilson does a thorough job of dealing with them in relation to the implied reader of Rushdie's novel, but what do they reveal about Rushdie himself?[40]

One of the most obvious things Rushdie's commitment to a

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[39]Kaiser Haq, "Salman Rushdie and the Rise of the Indo-Anglian Novel," p.21.

[40]In summary, Wilson describes Rushdie's implied reader as someone for whom art is not only mimetic, for whom history as she is writ is not "incontrovertible objective fact," whose literary frame of reference spans several centuries and whose national frame of reference is not limited to India (34).

mixed tradition signals is a boundless, almost gluttonous love of literature, of the reading of it as well as the writing of it. By drawing unapologetically on so many different influences in a single work, he really does break down boundaries (between media, for instance, and between Eastern and Western notions of literature) and extends our thinking about what the novel can be and do. He invests it with novelty again. In a sense, a novel like Midnight's Children acts as a bridge between cultures, and in writing such a novel, Rushdie can be understood to be embracing the idea of an international community. For it is certain that the kind of reader he implies is one whose cast of mind and imagination is not seriously constrained by national or cultural boundaries.

Thus far in the discussion, we have been emphasizing the fact that what Rushdie has been attempting, by way of the magical elements in his narrative, the re-visioning of history, the stylized oral narrative and his adherence to a mixed tradition, is to expand our notion of reality, to open up the universe a little more, the literary universe as well as the physical one we all inhabit. But as an exploration of Rushdie's definition of his own technique will reveal, there is also something else Rushdie is attempting in Midnight's Children.

Earlier in the discussion of magic realism, it was made clear that one of the conventions of the mode necessitated

that the "magic" be firmly rooted in social and political realities. In fact, this is Rushdie's definition of his own brand of magic realism. He dislikes the use of the word "fantasy" to describe the non-naturalistic elements in his novels because, to him, "fantasy" suggests the notion of whimsy and randomness.[41] He thinks of the magical element in his work as a method of producing "intensified images of reality," images which have roots in observable, verifiable fact. It is important for him to make actuality "more intense" in fiction; that way, he hopes, it is experienced more intensely. One of the ways in which Rushdie makes actuality more intense is through the use of humour. To see how Rushdie adheres to the convention that these intensifications have to be grounded in something real, in some social or political context, and to see also how he uses humour as a starting point for thought, let us examine his portrayal of a representative of British colonialism.

In earlier chapters of the thesis, the problem of writing about the "other" and getting it right was touched upon. Gordimer objected to Coetzee's characterization of Michael K, Coetzee felt that the novel was after bigger game than the critical-realist type favoured by Gordimer, and Rushdie was dismayed by the way Indians were being portrayed in films made by the British. But what about Rushdie's characterization of

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[41]John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), 231-261.

Methwold? Is he just hitting back with a stereotype? Or is there more to his portrait of the first and last Englishman in India than that?

For comic purposes, most of Rushdie's characters are grotesques, their limitations and quirks are exaggerated to make them stand out. And Rushdie's treatment of Methwold is not much different. Methwold, too, is a caricature, and it might be tempting to write off Rushdie's portrayal of him as cynical and irresponsible, like the stuff of political cartoons. However, there is more to Rushdie's portrait of Methwold than mockery. Through Methwold, Rushdie is articulating protest, not only against the colonizers of India, but against the Indians themselves. A closer look at Methwold and the context in which he appears will make it clear that there is a double edge to this political cartoon. The humour Rushdie arrives at through the episode is self-critical as well as critical of the other.

The chapter in which Methwold figures (92-106) is titled after him and his ancestor, another William Methwold, officer of the East Indian Company who, according to Saleem, got the idea in 1663 of a British Bombay. Methwold's idea came closer to reality, Saleem informs us, through the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of the Portuguese House of Braganza, since the Portuguese were the first conquerors of Bom Bahia. In 1668, the Company got its hands on the island, and it became Bombay.

The chapter opens with Saleem searching back through the

layers of invasions, conquerings and reclamations that have marked the history of Bombay in order to uncover the first inhabitants. Underneath these layers of actual, imperial history, Saleem imagines that magical, primeval time and the things existing in it - Koli fishermen in their Arab dhows, coconuts, rice and the "benign influence" of the goddess Mumbadevi, whose name, Saleem thinks, could very well have been the city's had it not been invaded by outsiders. Saleem then reflects on the changes in Bombay since its origins and wonders where those first inhabitants are now. Coconuts and rice, he knows, are still here. Coconuts even have their own festival each year. Rice hasn't been so successful. He laments that while the nation is "full of rice-eaters," rice paddies lie under concrete buildings. And the goddess Mumbadevi, he notes, has fallen out of favour, having been replaced by Ganesh in the people's affections. But of the first inhabitants, though, the Kolis have done worst of all. Saleem then describes the effects of the imperialist enterprise on the indigent people. True, he says, the Kolis have given their name to a district, Colaba, but they are "squashed" between the naval base and the sea. A fort, then a city took their land and pile-drivers stole pieces of their sea. Sometimes he sees a "smarting glint" in Koli eyes of "old defeats and dispossessions," yet the Arab dhows with their spreading sails are still to be seen in the evenings (94).

After giving us an account of the effects of colonial

domination on one Indian city and its people, Saleem swiftly turns to August 1947, a date that signalled the end of the British dominion of "fishing-nets, coconuts, rice and Mumbadevi"(94). Several months before this date, we are told that his parents entered into a bargain with one William Methwold, a British colonial and descendant of the first Methwold.

This William Methwold has as his outstanding feature a magnificent head of hair, hair that is enticingly parted. It is a hairline, specifically, along which "history and sexuality run" (95). Methwold seduces women with it, and his impeccably parted hairline prefigures another famous one, the hairline of Indira Gandhi.

Methwold's estates are comprised of four identical houses named after the palaces of Europe. He is willing to sell them for a ridiculously low price to several Indian families under certain conditions: that the houses be bought with everything in them, that the entire contents be retained, and that the transfer of deeds takes place the precise moment of India's independence.

This, Methwold says, is his little "parting game." After all, he continues, there is not much left for the British but games. He laments briefly to Ahmed Sinai over the speed at which the idea of Independence came about:

Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly,

> up and off. You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it. And now, suddenly, independence. Seventy days to get out. I'm dead set against it myself, but what's to be done? (96)

What Methwold does is stage his own transfer of power at the moment the Raj is staging its. History is theatre to him. As a descendant of the first Methwold, "the chap who had the idea of building this whole city," the departing Methwold feels the need to play his part.[42]

Thus, as the sun drops into the horizon on August 15, 1947, Methwold, standing on one of the hills on his estate, puts his hand to his head in an odd kind of salute, and pulls off a hairpiece. It is obvious that Rushdie is lampooning a departing Englishman's abdication of power here, and in that way is intensifying actuality, but along with provoking our laughter, this joke provokes us to think further about Methwold and his influence on Indians. After all, Methwold's hair, with its meticulous centre-part, which seduced women and wielded so much power, was only a peruke, a facade of power.

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[42]Methwold's statement - that his descendant was the chap who built Bombay - contains an undercurrent of the same thinking that Aadam Aziz encountered in Heidleberg: that somehow Europeans were the ones who "discovered" India (11).

Methwold's hairpiece, in a sense, is emblematic of the entire effort of entrenched power to make itself look natural and legitimate. In one swipe, that power is revealed as fraudulent. When British rule ends, Methwold removes his wig, and what the Indians are left with is the sense that they have been duped, by gimcrackery and improvisation.

Because it is the Indians who are the target of Rushdie's satire in this episode, as much if not more than Methwold is. For we are told of what happened on the Estates between the time Methwold sold them to the Indians and the time of Independence. At first, the Indian inhabitants of Methwold's estates were full of complaints about the British things they were forced to live with -- talking budgies, ceiling fans, soft mattresses, half-empty pots of Bovril, used brassieres and photos of British families. But slowly, Saleem points out, the estate begins to change them (99). They start adopting British ways. For instance, at six o'clock, the residents slip out to their gardens for cocktail hour and in Methwold's presence slip into their imitation Oxford accents. It seems they have learned to live with ceiling fans and budgies as well. As Saleem indicates further on in the novel when explaining his infatuation with Evie Burns, Indians have always been vulnerable to Europeans (185). And in this episode, we see this vulnerability and its consequences: Europe is repeating itself in India, this time as farce.

That history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as

farce, is the subject of Marx's 18th Brumaire, and there are clearly strains of this idea in Rushdie's chapter. Through his satire, Rushdie seems to be implying the following. That here we find that Indians have achieved Independence. That for the first time in hundreds of years, they are able to make their own history. But what do they do? The comic and tragic fact is that they seem compelled to make it under the inherited circumstances with which they are confronted. They stage a new history in adopted costumes, accents and customs. They cast back to the British in order to advance reality.

The idea of humour is what distinguishes Rushdie most clearly from Gordimer and Coetzee. This becomes particularly evident when we compare some of those broadly political themes taken up by Gordimer and Coetzee as they are treated by Rushdie. For instance, the ideas of History and specific histories that pervaded the works of the other novelists also figure in Midnight's Children.

We have seen how Saleem's "history" rivals that of the "official" history, which, as far as he is concerned, consists of politician's unreal versions of events. In opposition to offical history, he writes an "uncertain" history, a history as filtered through memory, which, according to him, is the only real way one can tackle the problem of "writing" history. Backgrounding his novel are actual historical events like the massacre at Amritsar, the

language riots, the volatile feuding of the Muslims and Hindus, the partition of India, the Indo-Pakistani war, the assassination of Gandhi and the declaration of the State of Emergency under Indira Gandhi, to name a few. We have also seen the kinds of things Saleem incorporates into his version of history -- those magical things that are, for him, as significant a part of reality as objective facts. What we now want to consider is the role history plays on the level of content in Rushdie's novel.

In The Conservationist, Gordimer focused on the specific history of a white South African alongside which were intimations of a suppressed black history. Her protagonist failed to acknowledge his responsibility to history, to the specific circumstances defining the public sphere surrounding him, and as such, "died" historically. Black history was revealed as resuming its course by the novel's end. In Burger's Daughter, South African history in a new configuration is presented, and, as in the earlier work, is the realm of necessity. Like Rushdie's novel, Gordimer's relies on actual historical events: the Soweto Uprising is one of the historical events to which her novel is a response. And as is usual in Gordimer's fiction, the determining powers of history are almost impossible for her protagonist to deny. What was implied in The Conservationist is made explicit in Burger's Daughter: one has to accept one's history, it is one's fate. Even if it has horrifying aspects, it must be

faced up to and lived through.

In Coetzee's novels, on the other hand, it is History in the abstract that is presented. There are few specifics grounding it or defining it as any particular history. In the two novels of Coetzee's previously discussed, History is a brutal force that interrupts nature and dehumanizes individuals. Michael K, for instance, was trying to live outside of history as a gardener, attuned to the earth and its seasonal rhythms. Various figures tried to lure him into civilization but he resisted and instead summoned up enough energy to live, according to those embroiled in history, in "the old way." For K, time is as full as it ever was, and so he carried on, conceptualizing and creating his own history. In writing the life and times of such a figure, Coetzee could be seen to be intervening in "official" history, to be forging a place for one of the forgotten ones in the dominant historical narrative.

The Magistrate of Waiting for the Barbarians, because of his occupation, was embroiled in the History of Empire. Yet the novel quite lyrically records his desire to escape that history, to live in the old way, like Michael K, in a timelessness outside of history.

For Coetzee, it seems, History is a nightmare -- a state that many of his characters wish to escape or transcend, usually by embracing indigent ways. Clearly, though, the possibilities of escape or transcendence are very slim. And

as far as Gordimer is concerned, history is here, we have it, and whether it is a nightmare or not, we can't escape it. We have to find our place in it, fight against it if it is unjust, and do what we can to alter its course.

Because it is the nature of comedy to distort and it is the nature of Rushdie's brand of magic realism to demonstrate intensified images of reality, one of the things we can see Rushdie doing in Midnight's Children is taking some of the notions of history raised by Gordimer and Coetzee to their extreme. The effect of this humour and intensification is one of detachment. As we shall see, Rushdie's treatment of history is more distanced than Gordimer's and Coetzee's.

For instance, for Saleem, History is also a nightmare, one that he can't wake up from. While he longs at times to escape history, it becomes clear that an escape can only be momentary and that it incurs problems of its own. There is also in Rushdie's novel, as in Coetzee's, the notion that there is a state that exists in which a person is not vulnerable to history. Take, for instance, the opening pages of Midnight's Children in which Rushdie poignantly characterizes Aadam, the first man, living in a state of paradise but who then falls from that into history. What makes him vulnerable to history (and to women) is his lack of faith, the implication being that if one is a faithful adherent, one will not be vulnerable to history.

In any case, by virtue of the fact that he was born at the

very moment of India's independence, Saleem becomes "handcuffed to history," his life inextricably linked to the life of the nation, his head filled with the sense of his historical importance. Upon his birth, his parents receive a congratulatory letter from Nehru that enforces what is to be Saleem's intimate and eventually debilitating connection. The letter reads: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own"(122).

The metaphorical sense, then, in which Rosa Burger is connected to history is evident in Saleem, but, in his case, is taken a few steps further. Rosa, if you recall, was born the day the first Afrikaner Nationalist Party came into power in South Africa, and so her life story, like Saleem's, in some ways reflects the history of her country. Both Rosa and Saleem, in the process of discovering their own history in the context of their country's history, are perplexed by the questions of identity, and by the problem of finding a purpose and meaning for themselves. But the manner in which their journeys are conveyed is, obviously, very different as a comparison of them will show.

"Fathered" by history, Saleem's connection to it has some unusual effects. One, his connection creates around him "a glowing and inescapable mist of expectancy"(152). Because he is midnight's child, it is assumed, great things are in store for him, he can be "any old thing" he wants to be. Rosa

Burger is similarly burdened by history, the difference being that others' assumptions of what she can be are limited to one thing. Fathered by Lionel Burger, a militant Communist, it is expected that Rosa will pick up his torch because she is Burger's daughter. Bothered by the clear sense of direction that others' assume for her future, unable to live under her father's shadow, Rosa leaves South Africa for France. Saleem, similarly disturbed by the clarity of purpose of those around him, takes refuge in a washing chest. In the washing chest, he is "safe from all pressures, concealed from the demands of parents and history . . ."(156).

The second thing Saleem's connection to history does is put him under the illusion that he is at the centre of events, that the universe revolves around him, and that he is responsible for the unfolding of history. It is true that in order to tell his story, he has to swallow multitudes, but his imperial self-ishness is not merely a story-telling device. To the young Saleem, many things substantiate his centrality. There is the fact that his face corresponds to the map of India, his huge nose being the Deccan peninsula, and the birthmarks on his right ear and left side of his face being, respectively, the East and West wings of Pakistan (232). Then there are instances when events in his life alter larger historical events. For example, he goes careening into the language marchers on Evie's bike and provides them with their battle-cry. There are also occasions in which things done to

or by Saleem are paralleled in the public realm. For instance, when Fat Perce slams the door on Saleem's finger and blood rushes from its tip, "a similar thing happened to history," he writes, outlining the different modes by which he is connected to history, "and all sorts of everywhichthingbegan pouring out all over us. . .(238).

Just these few excerpts from the career of Saleem give a wildly exaggerated meaning to Lukács's maxim, "everything is politics," and enforce the point that Saleem's connection to history is more than a metaphorical one. Not only does every thought, action and emotion of his run into politics, but his body is literally the site of politics. The integral relationship between the public and private realms that Lukács insisted on is taken to a ridiculous limit in this novel. In India, for Saleem at least, there seems to be no such thing as an insular private life -- a small thing like a sneeze from him is enough to start a riot. Similarly, the public realm won't stay at bay. Instead, we see it, in a mood of black humour, invading even the most private of parts as, for example, when Saleem is castrated under Indira Gandhi's sterilization campaign.

In a less sardonic but similar sense, we saw how Rosa Burger's sexual life was impinged upon by her historical circumstances. In order to deliver and receive messages from an political prisoner, she was forced by her parents to act as the prisoner's fianc¿e. As well, while in South Africa, men

seemed to be drawn to her because of her august father. It is only when she escapes to France that she can enjoy a private life and be loved and desired for herself.

Rosa's struggle to find her historical place is a struggle she shares with Saleem, the results of which are perhaps more positive in her case. Rosa returns to South Africa from abroad because she realizes that her attempt to escape history had consequences of its own which didn't innoculate her from suffering. When Rosa returns to South Africa from France, in the new-found knowledge that she must accept her fate, that what she must do is act to stop suffering, she is detained without trial and imprisoned. Because she is the child of prominent Communist activists, she is suspect. Yet, the fact that the novel ends with Rosa in prison is not cause for despair. Rosa has finally found her place, her own kind of political commitment, and we are meant to feel that the hope for the future may be found to lie with the children, the black children who have revolted against the inadequacies of their educational system, and the white children of radicals, willing to battle the injustices of history in whatever way they can.

Buffetted, as he says, by too much history, Saleem, too, is given an opportunity to escape history's grasp. Shortly after his family moves to Pakistan, near the end of Book II, a bomb drops and kills all of his kin. So, Saleem, now an orphan, enters adulthood without the "daily pin-pricks of

family life" to deflate "the great ballooning fantasy of history"(345). Memoryless, pastless, cleansed of notions of importance and emptied of history, Saleem forgets his name and becomes "buddha," under which appellation he finds work as a mine-sniffer for the Pakistani army. However, he soon realizes that "the philosophy of acceptance" demonstrated by his buddha role has consequences no more or less fortunate than those caused by his earlier "lust for centrality"(356). By seceding from history, he realizes he has set a bad example: he may have prompted the secession of East Wing into Bangladesh.

When a snake-bite reconnects him to his past, Saleem returns to Delhi, only to be imprisoned with all the other children of midnight, tortured and finally castrated. Fed up with politics ("it is an dirty business," he says), drained of hope, Saleem instead places his faith in the children of the Emergency. He becomes the surrogate father to one such child -- Aadam, born at the precise moment of Emergency. ("There is no escape from recurrence," says Saleem). The possibilities latent in these children make up for the possibilities killed in the midnight's children. When these children act, he says, they will be impossible to resist (425). By the novel's end, Saleem, "disconnected" and "unplugged" from history, finally places himself. His will be a "peripheral" role, that of storyteller, writer and preserver of history. His act of remembering, writing and "chutnifying" history, he discovers,

is an important one. It becomes a way of rescuing history, of protecting it from "the corruption of clocks." By "pickling" the past, Saleem hopes he can save a nation from amnesia. But most important, by giving history a shape and a form, Saleem hopes he has given it meaning:

> One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth . . . that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (461)

One of the most frequent criticisms of Midnight's Children has been directed towards the pessimism of its ending.[43] The novel ends with Saleem, both master and victim of his times, imagining a horrible future in which the millions he has tried to contain and convey trample him under foot and suck him into "the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes" (463). Rushdie, as by now must be apparent, talks a great deal outside of his fiction about his fiction, and in a number of essays and interviews, he challenges this criticism by insisting on the importance of looking at the form of his

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[43]See, for one, Maria Couto's review in Encounter, Vol.LVIII, No.2 (February 1982), 61-66.

novel. To see the ending as pessimistic, according to Rushdie, is to read the novel in too linear a fashion.[44] What he had hoped readers would recognise is that the form of the novel alleviates the pessimism of its content. The optimism, he maintains, is to be found in the "teeming" structure of the novel, a structure designed to show a country capable of renewal and regeneration.[45]

In emphasizing process over product, in thinking that the plurality of the novel's language, tone and viewpoint should override the narrative message of the novel, and that the end of one possibility, Saleem, should not mean the end of all possibilities, Rushdie can be understood to be locating his commitment in form. In one sense, then, Rushdie's answer to the question of a writer's responsibility is an aesthetic one. But that is not to say that his is only an aesthetic solution or that an aesthetic solution is somehow of lesser importance, politically speaking. As this chapter has shown, the project of political commitment can be potently carried out on levels other than theme. Technical and stylistic innovations,

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[44]Rushdie makes this point in the Haffenden and Kunapipi interviews, as well as in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands."

[45]By writing a novel about India with an "open" structure, Rushdie hoped to show that there were a multitude of possibilities in India and for India (Haffenden interview). Shame, on the other hand, is a novel that in some ways is about Pakistan, a nation that Rushdie feels represents a closure of possibilites, hence, he could not write an open-structured book. Nevertheless, the female text in Shame does subvert to some extent the tyrannical macho text, which, to my thinking at least, implies one kind of possibility in the region of the feminine.

particularly in the hands of a writer as gifted and energetic as Rushdie, can be purposeful and political.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this thesis has been to investigate the ways in which several contemporary writers address the issue of the writer's responsibility. Outside of their fiction, two of these writers, Nadine Gordimer and Salman Rushdie respectively, call upon writers of fiction to engage themselves politically. As we saw, Gordimer believes writers can do this by putting themselves into a significant relationship with the society in which they are writing. In Rushdie's view, it is the writer's responsibility to "take sides," to enter into arguments over what constitutes reality for that is what it means to him to be politically committed. John Coetzee, the third novelist discussed, chooses not to call explicitly on the writer for anything, although he does imply (through his reticience in interview situations) that the writer perhaps has a responsibility to the work of art, to let it speak for itself.

We have seen how the question of responsiblity is responded to by these writers in their fiction. Gordimer answers with a vigorous critical realism, characterized by a reliance on actual history and an insistence on the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres. Coetzee is dealt with in contrast to Gordimer for it seems that in his novel, Life and Times of Michael K, he is adopting an apparently apolitical stance, a contentious and somewhat

vulnerable stance, particularly for a writer in his situation. Coetzee's "answer" to the question of a writer's responsibility is a less direct one than Gordimer's. The chapter on Life and Times of Michael K discloses the "bigger game" he is after. The final chapter of the thesis is devoted to Salman Rushdie, a writer clearly in a very different situation from the one Gordimer and Coetzee are in, who tackles the question of responsibility in a daring novel that mixes magic, humour and political realism.

While pointing to their many interesting differences, it has also been the aim of this thesis to reveal how Gordimer, Coetzee, Rushdie, and, to a lesser extent, Orwell, connect with and complement each other. It can be understood, of course, that I was not recommending (on political grounds) any one form as suitable for politically committed expression; rather, I meant to show the many forms commitment could take.

One of the earliest problems encountered during the writing of the thesis had to do with Orwell's essay, with the problem as to whether or not the values Orwell upheld in "Inside the Whale" would be relevant in a contemporary South African or a post-colonial context. And further, could they apply to a writer like Rushdie whose novelistic practices include techniques Orwell couldn't have anticipated?

Orwell thought in "Inside the Whale" that the novel as the product of the "autonomous individual" was doomed, that the

"truth to experience" he argued as being crucial for writers would collapse in face of the totalitarian structures he foresaw controlling the very terms by which to make sense of truth and experience. One of Orwell's central concerns in the essay had to do with the individual and his or her ability to resist the pressures of history and stand for decency and truth.

But it became clear in the novels surveyed in this thesis, that with some variations, individual protagonists have either been able to resist or acknowledge the pressures of history and in doing so, have been able to stand for a kind of decency and truth, a fact that speaks highly of their authors. Even in a historical situation as bleak and reprehensible as South Africa's, one writer can insist that by facing the situation, regardless of its horrifying aspects, an individual subject can forge an effective place for herself in it. In the same situation, another writer can imagine a figure who at least conceptually forges a place for himself outside of history, thereby suggesting the possibility that the individual and free will can compete, in some sense, with the pressures of a barbaric social structure. And in another situation altogether, a writer can create a protagonist who, though unable to resist history physically, does, by the act of writing his version of history, resist an "official" history that alters truth and experience.

While not explicitly concerned about, or committed to, the

idea of the individual self as Gordimer and Coetzee are, Rushdie does, through his form, try to make sense of truth and experience. As well, he embodies some of the qualities Orwell appreciated, namely, those of decent human feelings as conveyed, for instance, in Saleem's relationship with Padma. We have seen how Rushdie's humour and invention are, to a large extent, based in decency and affection, so in celebrating Rushdie, we are not as far from Orwell as we might think. In fact, both Rushdie and Orwell were concerned, as was evidenced in their essays, with the problem of how to write sincerely so that the subjects conveyed could be felt and experienced, and not necessarily easily swallowed. The notion of how to do this is complicated in our time, but Rushdie showed us his way (as Gordimer and Coetzee showed us theirs), a way Orwell couldn't have anticipated but probably would have appreciated.

In his book, Orwell, Raymond Williams describes Orwell as a man of "continual mobility" (88), a mobility as much intellectual as physical. Throughout his life, Williams notes, Orwell assumed a series of roles that enabled him to connect closely with many different people. He went directly to the centres of the history determining him -- imperialism, revolution, poverty -- to experience them first-hand and then write about them. Like Saleem, Orwell tried to swallow it all. He made a single life contain a multitude of

experiences, thereby making his history, like Saleem's, more than an individual history.

It is for his mobility that Orwell should be remembered, asserts Williams, rather than for the pessimism of his historical pronouncements in essays like "Inside the Whale." And this mobility is very much like the "plasticity" Roberto Unger advocates in a recent book.[1] In order to achieve this view point, qualities like flexibility and adaptability become important. We can see these qualities quite clearly in Rushdie. Of course, such an attitude is easier to adopt in some situations than in others. Rushdie has the relative luxury of being in a predicament that is not as clear-cut as that of Gordimer and Coetzee; he doesn't have the same kind of enemy to write against, so he can afford, perhaps, to be more detached in his fiction than they can. Still, if in a more

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[1]Roberto Unger, Plasticity and Power (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Although I have not had the opportunity to read Unger's book, I have read a review of it and several of the other volumes making up his series, Politics: A Work of Constructive Social Theory.

In his review of the series to date, John Dunn summarizes Unger's case in detail. See "Doing Something" in London Review of Books, 17 March 1988, 12-14. What Unger insists, writes Dunn, is "that there never are deep structural reasons or sets of closed and potentially discoverable causes why any human milieu is just as it is, and therefore there never is the slightest guarantee that it cannot and will not at any point be rendered decisively different" (13). Unger establishes, then, "the potential openness to history and human agency of any set of human social arrangements"(13). The formulation, "everything is politics," is not taken negatively by Unger. In fact, he argues that it can be quite liberating. This prompts him to recommend that we approach history from the point-of-view of anti-necessitarianism. See the introduction to False Necessity, the second volume in the series.

restrained way, these qualities can be found in Gordimer and Coetzee. Gordimer, for instance, implies in The Conservationist that in order to engage one's self effectively in social history, one has to be adaptable. An individual has to be aware of the details comprising that history and has to adjust his or her consciousness and actions to fit its requirements. And as a writer, Gordimer exercises a considerable flexibility in her treatment of South African history. She has confronted its configurations from a diversity of perspectives in a series of novels and short stories. More subtly, Coetzee can be seen to be exercising a kind of flexibility in his resistance to labels like "white South African novelist," and his demanding a kind of flexibilty, particularly of his readers, through the elusive settings of his novels and through ambiguous characterizations like those of Michael K and the Magistrate.

Flexibility and adaptability are also qualities that can be important and liberating to a critic. They don't have to be thought of as markers of a weak or indecisive mind. When many of us read, after all, we are not at first thinking of where we stand. Typically we read a novel with anticipation, ready for its impressions to be made upon us, so that we can then figure out what kind of a world it is we are in. At first, we read the map. The second time around we start exploring the territory. It is after this that we have to decide whether or not we think it's a worthwhile place to go

and here is where our responsibility as critics lies. Do we think this is a novel worth reading? Or is it a novel to be avoided?

All of the novels discussed in this thesis are worth reading. Novelists as talented and as intellectually interesting as Gordimer, Coetzee and Rushdie can release us from the constraints of our own culture and make us more aware of the repressions at work in other cultures. Novelists such as these can also help persuade us that literary integrity and political conviction do not have to be opposing aims. The world has shrunk, and we in the West are part of the natural audience for these writers. They are, in a sense, our writers and they are, most emphatically, a living argument against Orwell's pessimism.

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